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OR,

Saul Sunday's Search for Glory.

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SCOTT," "JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE KING,"
"OLD '49," "PISTOL JOHNNY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAIDEN AND THE MAJOR.

"A SKITTISH little filly as mortal man ever
tried to bridle! What will she act like when the
curb begins to tighten?"

Major Holly Gardenhire made a wry grimace
as that query flashed across his busy brain, and
there was a curious quiver to the thick, iron-
gray beard that masked his mouth. His eyes
glowed with more than their wonted degree of
brilliance, which not even the half-closed lids
could wholly conceal, and as he drew back a lit-
tle further, his figure slightly crouched, more
than ever resembling that of one lying in am-
bush.

He was watching the open doorway of a store
midway down the block, now brightened by the
figure of a young lady whose eyes were flashing

GRAVE AS A PROFESSIONAL MUTE, SOLEMN SAUL MADE HIS WAY DOWN THE
MIDDLE OF THE STREET.

up and down the street, seemingly undecided which direction to take.

"Either way, and you'll wish you hadn't, Lida—my Lida from this time henceforth!" muttered the major, with eyes only for the lady, forgetting for the moment that he was himself liable to observation, from the rear if not in front. "A woman's trick, but even a woman would hardly dare try it on again."

He saw the young lady step to the rude plank sidewalk, moving rapidly toward him, and his beard bristled anew as he drew still further back, biding his time. A hasty move had betrayed him once, but that should not happen again.

Not until the rapid click-click of dainty heels came to his keen ears did the major move, then stepping briskly forward he stopped short with lifted hat and bland smile to utter:

"Your servant, Miss Corwin! Homeward bound, may I ask?"

The young lady paused, recoiling and halting as though to retrace her steps; and though her veil was drawn, a visible flush mantled her cheeks. The major's eyes snapped, but his voice was suave as usual.

"I saw you call at Mason's, but hardly dared join a lady while on shopping bent, even with an excuse so urgent as mine," he glibly uttered, holding himself in readiness to take whichever direction the young lady saw fit to elect. "So I took a stroll around the block and—behold my reward!"

"But you were going in the—"

"In the other direction, when you saw me—just so," blandly smiled the major, as Miss Corwin hesitated. "It is the unexpected that always happens; a motto of mine by adoption, dear lady. You thought I was waiting in one direction, and so—was that why you took the course directly opposite?"

"You are presuming too much, Major Gardenhire," coldly uttered the young lady, bowing stiffly, as though taking leave of him. "Why should I take so much trouble to avoid meeting you on the street?"

"Why, indeed!" was his echo, stepping briskly along by her side as she resumed her way. "And yet—can you frankly say that you have not taken just so much trouble, Miss Lida?"

"I deny your right to ask such questions, sir," bowing again. "Good-evening. I will not take you out of the way."

"Your way is mine, for the present, Miss Corwin," he persisted, his tone growing just a trifle less smooth and even. "There is something I wish to bring to your notice, and—"

"You know where I reside, Major Gardenhire."

"And I know, too, that one is not always certain of finding you at home. I called last evening, to receive just such an answer."

"I was otherwise engaged."

"So I learned afterward," his half-closed eyes flashing redly for an instant as they glanced toward that veiled face. "I was told you were suffering with a severe headache. Yet—half an hour later another caller was admitted, to remain for two long hours."

"My cousin, Dudley Mann; he called to see father on business," was the low, hurried response.

"And remained to court the daughter!"

Swift as thought was the retort, and one used to the low, soft, smooth tones of the gallant major would hardly have recognized his voice just then. It was harsh, hoarse, full of hottest jealousy. For a single breath his mask was dropped, and Lida Corwin shrunk from his side with a sensation of fear, even while her eyes were lighting up with the fires of indignation.

What right had this man to use such words, such tones toward her? She had known him scarce a month, and not at all intimately even during that brief space. He had crossed their threshold less than a half-score times, and on every occasion his plea had been business with her father, the one banker of whom the mining-town of Prospect could boast.

Great as was her indignation, her amazement was even stronger, and before she could find fitting rebuke for such insolence, Major Gardenhire spoke again:

"Impudent, but true, Miss Corwin. Though barred out of paradise myself, I know precisely how matters progressed on the other side of that barrier. If Leonard Corwin knew as much, think you he would rest in such blissful security? Even now he is none too deeply infatuated with the son of his sister. What would it be, then, were he to learn that that nephew was scheming to become his son?"

"You have no right—I will not listen to your shameful insults longer!" passionately cried Lida, flinging off the hand that dared to touch her arm in warning. "Leave me, sir, or I'll call for help!"

Fortunately for both, perhaps, few people were stirring on the street at that hour, and not one was near enough to catch those words. Major Gardenhire may have known this by instinct, but he did not deign to cast even a single glance around, to make sure his words were caught only by the flushed, indignant yet trembling maiden, by whose side he persistently maintained his place.

His brief show of angry jealousy had vanished, leaving only a half-sad, half-pitying commiseration to be read in his face and eyes. The latter were more widely opened than usual in his strong interest, and for the time what those who liked him least called his squint, was hardly to be observed.

Despite his rather diminutive stature, Major Holly Gardenhire just then looked almost noble. And why not, when he was risking his own hopes of future bliss on the frail chance of saving this fair girl from shipwreck on the shoals of ill-placed love?

"You may call, and help may come, Miss Corwin," his voice once more smooth and equable. "You may avoid me now, as you did last evening, as you attempted to do but a few minutes ago when you so suddenly remembered an errand that rushed you into Mason's; but the time *must* come when you will have to listen to the words I am prepared to speak."

Lida cast a swift glance around them, and as she saw no aid immediately at hand, her own hands closed quickly with an impulse which she found it by no means easy to conquer.

Though by no means an amazon in height and proportions, she stood more than an inch over the major, and she felt sure that she could brush him from her path without an actual struggle. Only for her womanly horror of "a scene" in public, she would almost certainly have made the attempt, so intense was her indignation at his impertinent persistence.

"If you were a gentleman there could be no question of summoning assistance, Major Gardenhire. Will you leave me a fragment of respect for you, as a business friend of my father, by going your way and leaving me to go mine? The street is no place for such words as you have already dared to utter!"

"You denied me admittance to your house, Miss Corwin. You tried to dodge me but a bit ago. Can you deny this?"

"That you can ask such a question ought to be answer enough," the maiden flashed, swiftly, her eyes gleaming through the veil that covered her slightly flushed face. "If you persist—"

"Permit me, Miss Corwin," bowed the major, his beard bristling.

"Then—I admit both charges. I refused to see you last night. I tried to avoid meeting you to-day. I entered Mason's solely to keep from meeting you, and my end would have been gained only for your altering your course, and lying in wait for me like a—"

The sentence was left incomplete, but its sting was none the less keen for that, though Major Gardenhire smiled as though he rather liked it than not. Only for an instant. Then he grew grave and earnest in face as he was in voice and manner.

"There is no need to speak more plainly on your part, Miss Corwin. I know who warned you against me. I know who advised you to avoid any confidential converse with me. And he acted wisely, from his standpoint. With almost any other man in question, his ruse would have succeeded. With me it has only gained him a few hours' respite."

"I do not pretend to understand what you mean," coldly retorted Lida, turning the corner and taking the shortest way home. "All I know, it has gained me a most disagreeable escort."

"You are very hard, Miss Corwin," with a barely perceptible sigh. "Some day you will recall your words and wish they had never found utterance. They are so hard that, were I one whit less your friend, they would drive me into silence, leaving you to fall a victim to that audacious schemer, Dudley Mann!"

The maiden turned upon him with a low, passionate cry, and only for his swift action her gloved hand would surely have swept across his bearded lips. His fingers closed about that round wrist, holding her helpless for the moment, as she panted:

"How dare you to couple *his* name with so foul an epithet?"

"I dare, because it is the truth," was the cool response, his eyes boldly meeting her indignant gaze. "I dare, because I am your friend, and as such am resolved to save you from the devilish snares which are being shaped for your unwary feet. I dare, even though I know so daring will bring upon my head your bitterest curses, your deepest hatred, instead of the love for which I would gladly empty my veins and lay down my life!"

For a brief space Lida Corwin gazed at the speaker, too thoroughly amazed for speech, but then she gave a short, hysterical laugh, saying:

"Are you not prematurely exposing your hand, Major Gardenhire?"

"I have nothing to conceal, so need not pick and choose my words, Miss Corwin. I understand your sneer, but it stings me not. It is true that I love you as a man only loves the woman whom he would choose from all the world to become his wife; but it is not mere jealousy that forces me to use the terms I have—not jealousy of Dudley Mann, your father's clerk, your own cousin. Shall I tell you why?"

"I have heard too much already."

"Because a gentleman can be jealous only of

his equal. I am not unduly proud, but I can never admit that Dudley Mann is that equal.

"Nor I!" flashed Lida. "He is a thousand-fold your superior!"

"Will you say as much when Dudley Mann stands in the felon's dock?" sharply demanded the major, his beard bristling afresh.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAJOR PLAYS A TRUMP.

DESPITE her implicit confidence in the relative thus sharply assailed, Lida Corwin was taken aback by that pointed speech. False in *toto* as she firmly believed it, there was something in the manner of Major Holly Gardenhire that chilled her warm blood and sent a thrill of sickening dread to her heart.

The major saw this, and his tones softened, a white, slender-fingered hand gently touching her arm as though in readiness to lend support in case of need.

"You force me to use plain, harsh terms, dear lady, though I would have avoided them if possible."

"They are lies!" panted the maiden, rallying from the shock and shaking that hand from her arm. "You dare not repeat them in his presence!"

"I am ready to say even more to his very face, if nothing but his own confession will convince you, Miss Corwin," once more cold and even of speech. "Shall we turn back to the bank? It is not yet time for closing, and doubtless Mr. Mann will be at his post of duty."

There was a brief hesitation. Lida half turned to carry out that suggestion, but then she banished the thought. She would not give this bold calumniator even so much satisfaction. Not even in seeming would she share those charges against her cousin.

"Will you leave me?" she demanded, her voice harsh with repressed passion. "Shall I call for help?"

"I have said too much not to say more, Miss Corwin, and if you summon aid I will only have a larger audience to drink in my charges against Dudley Mann. You must hear me out. If you persist in going headlong to your ruin, at least my skirts shall be blame-free."

Lida made no immediate reply, but walked rapidly toward home. The major kept close by her side, measuring his pace by hers, quiet, cool, resolute. Evidently he meant all he said, and the maiden began to realize that the surest method of terminating that interview would be by hearing what he had to say.

She stopped short midway the block, a quick glance showing her that the street was clear of pedestrians for the time being.

"Finish what you have to say, as quickly as possible," she said, with forced composure. "You will never have another chance, for if you dare accost me again I will give you in charge."

"So you think now, no doubt," with a faint smile, "but I have faith that you will learn to look upon me as your best, truest, most faithful friend. Until then I am content to wait for my reward."

Lida made an impatient gesture, though she said nothing, and correctly interpreting this, Major Gardenhire at once came to the point:

"It is not such a pleasant subject that I wish to dwell upon it longer than necessary, Miss Corwin; but to avoid the necessity of going back to pick up stray threads, you must permit me a little latitude."

"Your father is sole owner of the only bank which Prospect can afford. It is a paying institution, but it rests solely upon his good credit. He alone is responsible for its integrity, he alone could be called upon to make good any loss or defalcation which might take place. Am I right, so far?"

Miss Corwin bowed in silence.

"Very good. Your father, with one clerk, does all the work of the bank. That clerk is the only child of his dead sister. He boards at a hotel, but he sleeps in a room at the rear of the bank proper. He is a gay, dashing, fun-loving young fellow, though steady as a clock during banking hours. Once more, am I right?"

Again that silent assent, though Lida drew her veil closer about her face and slightly quickened her steps as they were about to meet a couple of men who gazed curiously upon them.

"This is what you know about your cousin's life, Miss Corwin," resumed Gardenhire after passing the two men. "To you he has ever turned the brightest, cleanest side of—"

"There is no other!" flashed the maiden, quickly.

"Unfortunately I must prove to you there is another side, far less pleasing," was the cool, unmoved retort. "Dudley Mann is a model of business propriety and integrity while the bank is open, and while in the company of his uncle or his cousin; but no one would recognize him by that description when he is out with the boys."

"Then he is the wildest of the wild. Then he permits no man to drink more heavily, play higher and spend money more recklessly than he."

Lida abruptly faced the major with:

"Have you nothing but lies to tell? Am I

bearing with your insolence only for this? Mr. Mann does not drink or gamble!"

"No doubt he has often assured you thus," bowed Gardenhire, "but the record tells a different tale. Remember, Miss Corwin, what I tell you now I stand ready to repeat before Mr. Mann himself if you care to put us both to the test. And I reckon I can back my words with documents which even his nerve could not face unmoved."

"Go on," coldly uttered Lida, once more moving forward. "It is your turn now. The reckoning will come later."

"Thanks for the permission, Miss Corwin; it is so much more comforting than to have to talk without leave. But as I was saying, Dudley Mann spends far more money than any man can afford to, whose salary is no more than eighteen hundred a year. And, I think you will admit, he has no private fortune to back him up in his wild extravagance?"

He paused as though for a reply, but none was vouchsafed. Lida Corwin was keeping a tight grip on her temper now, and hardly dared trust herself to speak.

"That is a high figure for a young man to reach, in this imperfectly developed region, and as he is single, without any person to take care of save himself, Mr. Mann should be saving money against his settling down as the head of a family. Unfortunately he is wild and headstrong. Even worse, he is a gambler who bets without judgment, who crowds fortune the harder whenever she proves coy, and still worse: a man who never knows when to quit if he is ahead of the game. As a natural consequence he loses far more money than he can afford for a clerk on a modest salary; far more than he can ever pay without very generous friends to back him, or—"

"Or—what?" demanded Lida, facing the major with pale face but blazing eyes as he paused significantly.

"Or some method of making money which is almost certain to come to light in the end. Then—the prison cell!"

"You dare not—you are charging him with a crime?"

"Not exactly," with a fleeting smile and a bright flicker of light from his nearly closed lids. "It has not come to that, so far as I am concerned, Miss Corwin. Indeed, I fear you will say that I have permitted my regard for you—for your safety and well-being, that is—to carry me a little too far as it is. And yet—will you oblige me by glancing over these documents?"

As he spoke, Major Gardenhire produced several slips of paper from a leather notebook, taken from the bosom of his tightly-buttoned coat, bowing low as he spread them apart and held them before the eyes of the lady, yet taking care to keep them safely in his own possession.

Lida saw that there appeared to be promises to pay, or notes of some sort, each one signed by Dudley Mann. She instantly recognized his rather peculiar signature.

Almost instinctively she noted the amounts, turning paler still as the total flashed across her whirling brain. Surely she must be dreaming! Surely her cousin could never have incurred debts to that amount!

"Enough, surely, Miss Corwin, to justify much of what I have said," uttered the major, returning the notes to their former resting-place. "A little less than six thousand! And I have reason to believe that there are other bits of paper in existence which would run the sum total up to—well, a rather startling figure for a bank clerk who is wholly dependent on his salary."

"They are forgeries! And you—how did you get them?"

"Purely in the way of business, Miss Corwin," with a half-pitying smile about his eyes; the only features, save his nose, left open to view by that luxuriant beard. "Fortunately I am a man of business, and as such I have kept a clean record of all business transactions. When you so choose, I shall be most happy to explain just when and how the notes came into my hands. And to your ears alone will I give one underlying reason: I took up these I O U's because Dudley Mann was *your* cousin; because I had cause to fear you loved him as something nearer and dearer than a cousin!"

"Cousinly love is quite enough to make me denounce these notes as vile forgeries!" flashed Lida, her feelings fully overpowering her for the moment. "You shall explain how they came into your possession, but not to me alone. You shall confront Mr. Mann and answer for all you have said, all you have so vilely insinuated, to him in person, sir!"

Cold, unmoved, even smiling as she poured forth her passionate words, Major Holly Gardenhire stood before the maiden whose very soul he was so cruelly torturing. And when she paused for lack of breath rather than want of further speech, he equably responded:

"Nothing would please me better, Miss Corwin, believing as I have been taught, that crucial remedies are always the surest in the end. I made the offer before of my own free will. I would have insisted upon it had I not feared for its effect upon you, dear lady."

Lida Corwin could not trust herself to further

speech. Turning in the direction of the bank, she took the major's arm, not for support, but to guard against his giving her the slip.

He laughed softly at this, for right easily he interpreted her meaning. He made no resistance, for nothing could suit him better than to be seen walking arm in arm with Lida Corwin under the broad light of day. And he laughed all the easier because he knew that the poor girl never once gave that point a thought in her angry confusion.

"Your will guides, Miss Corwin, as a matter of course. I am more than ready to explain all I know in connection with these notes, but—have you paused to reflect what your honored father will think when he learns the whole truth concerning his trusted clerk? It is not yet too late to keep his dangerous secret. One word from you will seal my lips and place these notes in your hands, to be disposed of as you see fit. One word—one sweet vow, my—"

Lida swiftly withdrew her hand from his arm, flushing hotly as she only too clearly divined his meaning. He made no effort to retain control of the dainty member. He boldly met her flashing gaze, adding:

"Remember that if we go on to the bank, it must end in ruin for either your cousin or myself. If these are forgeries, as you hint, my race is run. If not—and one glance at his face will tell you the truth, dear lady—then you must know him for all I have said. And not only you, but your father will know the whole truth! So I say, take thought before you put us both to the test. For your sake I will bear this loss. But if I do, I must have my reward in another shape!"

Lida could not reply in words, just then. Driven to desperation she hurried on, soon coming in sight of the bank building, pausing abruptly as she saw the portly figure of her father just ascending the steps to enter the building.

Gardenhire quickly drew her hand through his arm and urged her forward, pausing when in front of the large window in the front of the bank building to rapidly whisper in her ear:

"Which is it, my darling? Will you face your father and your cousin, knowing how much depends upon the result? Or—will you bemoan?"

Without waiting for her reply, the audacious fellow brushed back her veil, fully exposing her pale face to view, then swiftly pressed his hot lips to hers in a passionate kiss!

CHAPTER III.

THE DECORATOR FROM DEAD-LIFT.

BUSINESS was hardly "rushing" at "Corwin's," that afternoon, although it was the only bank of deposit which Prospect could boast. But that was always the case on the last day of the week. Those who had deposits to make, and those who had money to draw out against their labor account, as a rule did so earlier in the day, and this Saturday was not an exception.

Dudley Mann, a well-built, fresh-colored, smart-looking young fellow enough, was busy over his books when his trained ear caught the sound of light footfalls on the stone steps leading to the front door.

A side glance from his position enabled him to note the comers, and a quick light of interest leaped into his frank, blue eyes, visible through the glasses he wore.

The bank building was not large, even for a comparatively new town like Prospect, though substantially built of native stone. The structure was only one story in height, raised a few feet above the level of the street and entered by way of a cut-stone flight of steps. The apartment occupied by the bank itself was fairly large, fitted up with a counter of polished wood, topped by a woven-wire guard, in which were two openings perhaps two feet in width, for the accommodation of customers and such business as they might have to transact across the counter.

This counter extended nearly across the front of the room, curving and running back to another apartment, leaving a narrow passageway between the wall and the woodwork. In that room Leonard Corwin, owner of the bank, was generally to be found during business hours, and in that room Dudley Mann passed his sleeping hours.

Just at present Mr. Corwin was out, and his clerk rose from his desk to wait upon the two men whose footsteps had drawn his attention from his work.

"Never mind rapping, stupid! Open the door! Will you never learn how to conduct yourself properly, as the valet of a gentleman should?" came a languidly impatient tone, followed by a muffled groan.

"Good Lawd! an' him a-cussin' an' a-kickin' jest fer my *not* stoppin' to knock no longer ago'n—yes, sir, boss!"

The fellow in livery flung wide the door with such nervous vigor that made the glass rattle, bobbing like a duck in a thunderstorm as he stepped aside to give his master free passage.

"That's better, Sunday, though you don't want to tear things. Simmer down, my fine fellow. Oil your joints to-night before you retire, and don't use grasshopper grease for that purpose, please. You really make me nervous

with your staccato movements and—yours, pardner!" abruptly breaking off with a short nod toward Dudley Mann. "Might I ask if—Saul Sunday, you clumsy scoundrel! If you break your neck I'll dock your wages!"

"Sufferin' grandpap to miseryation an' wuss!" groaned the man in livery, whose long legs had become entangled with the peculiar staff he carried, bringing him to the floor in a quivering heap. "As ef I'd do it—yes, your Honor, sir, boss!"

With a swift stride his master was beside him, bending over and then rising erect, one shake of his strong arm serving to disentangle Saul Sunday and set him on his feet.

"Sunday, you're a confounded nuisance. Sunday, if I didn't know you were playing for just that same thing, I'd discharge you without even the ghost of a character. As it is—prop your bundle of bones up in yonder corner and practice your lesson. Stick to it until I say quit. Sabe, Sunday?"

"Yes, sir, boss, an' I'm wishin' I didn't—wuss luck *me*!" mumbled the poor fellow, literally obeying the sharp commands of his master.

That master turned toward Dudley Mann, forcing a smile as he frankly said:

"Beg pardon, pardner, but unless I keep a stiff curb on the rascal, he'll never give over bucking. Tricky? Well, I should remark! He plays it so fine you'd be willing to take oath he was born without sense and kept on growing worse ever since. That's because I got the butt-end of a bargain, and he's playing to cry it off. Only for that—well, let me whisper a bit of a secret in your ear, pardner! Never try to set up a 'wally-de-sham,' for it's ten to one the thing turns out *all* sham, like my choice bit of bric-a-brac yonder!"

With a wave of his hand he called attention to Saul Sunday, who had propped himself in the corner, his long, gaunt features the very picture of subdued disgust with all things earthly, and his own lot in particular.

His little, deep-set gray eyes were gazing fishily upon the staff already alluded to, now held perpendicularly before him, to be shot downward until the spike in its smaller extremity was planted firmly in the flooring. A twist of his bony fingers turned a band of polished silver which encircled the staff near its head, then slipping the metal ring downward, the motion causing the wood above to divide into four equal parts. Within the shell thus exposed had been hidden a square of black velvet, the corners attached to each quarter. As these fell to a level, a smooth table in miniature was formed, on which Saul Sunday dropped a tiny black ball and three polished shells, formed from English walnuts by splitting the nuts in halves.

"Nickels, dimes an' dollars!" dolefully groaned the man in livery, shifting the shells one by one with his bony fingers. "Now you see it an' now you don't. Here she is an' thar she am. Over an' under, this way an' that, all the while the little joker—but you can't prove it ef you don't bet!"

Mechanically the clerk permitted his gaze to follow that waving hand, barely long enough to recognize the somewhat antiquated method of swindling greenhorns; but then his gaze returned to this glib-tongued stranger, his every sense on the keen alert, his voice cold and hard:

"It may be well played, but I've seen it before. If you have no other business—"

A soft, amused laugh cut him short and the stranger dropped a bit of pasteboard on the counter while speaking:

"Do I really look like a dead-beat, Mr. Mann? And are you a gentleman such as a rascal would pick out to skin by a trick as old as that? I don't kick on my own account, but I ought to on yours."

"Whar's my Glory Ann?" came a doleful groan from the corner where Saul Sunday was still nimbly manipulating his shells and little joker. "Will I? Kin I? Shell I ever find her? Oh, Glory—Glory Ann Sunday! Why did ye go fer to do it! Why did ye kiver me all over with—"

"Saul, you rascal!" sharply uttered his master.

"Yes, sir, boss, your Honor!" spluttered the man in livery, straightening up and making the shells fly with incredible swiftness, droning over his set phrases the while.

"Never mind him, dear sir," turning to the clerk, who was glancing keenly from card to face and back again. "Perfectly harmless, I assure you, but he's a little worse than usual this evening. Met a young lady while coming here, and the sight of her charms recalled a painful loss which partially unbalanced his brains—if he ever had any! And—Anything wrong with that doorplate, pardner?"

He bent forward as though to assure himself he had made no mistake in delivering his card, nodding cheerfully as he drew back again.

"Plain as print can make it, to my eyes. 'Andre Deutsch.' My name when I am putting on dignity. 'The Decorator From Dead-lift.' Simply a title won by many a long night's work, and—"

"We have no work in your line, I'm sorry to say, Mr. Deutsch," coldly interposed Mann, his eyes glowing brightly behind their gold-bowed

glasses. "If you wish, I will place your card in the rack for future reference in case we should decide to alter the furnishing of our establishment."

Andre Deutsch stared broadly at the speaker, plainly puzzled to interpret his meaning for a few moments, but then breaking into a musical laugh as the truth flashed upon him.

Dudley Mann flushed hotly as one hand slipped to the shelf below the counter, his fingers closing on the butt of a revolver. He did not like the looks of either man or master, and more than ever he suspected some cunning scheme for robbing the bank of which he had charge.

And yet, under different circumstances, Andre Deutsch was almost the last man living whom he would have picked out as a bank-thief.

A little above the average height, his figure was muscular without looking heavy, well proportioned in every particular. His face was more than ordinarily handsome, despite his strongly marked features, each one of which spoke decidedly of Hebraic descent. His eyes were black as polished jet, his nose aquiline, though of medium size, his lips red and full, his hair and full beard inky black, close curling yet silky.

His garb was neatly fitting, fashionably cut, such as may oftener be seen in large cities than among the mountains. The material was costly, but of rather gay hues, though this did not seem so much out of taste and keeping with his oriental face.

His bosom was crossed by a heavy gold cable, from which depended a seal and a richly jeweled charm. A single diamond flashed in his shirt, and his scarf-ring was circled by the same precious stones.

On his curling locks he wore a silk hat. On his feet neatly fitting boots of patent leather. In one gloved hand he bore a slender cane with golden crook.

"I really beg pardon, Mr. Mann," the brilliant stranger hastened to say, taking warning from those hardly squared jaws and gleaming eyes. "I ought not to have laughed, but the idea—of my working—was more than I could stand without."

Dudley Mann sharply tapped the card with a finger as he said:

"You bear decorator on your card, I believe?"

"Simply because I can't help painting the town whenever I strike a new location. I did this so lavishly at Dead-Lift that the sports unanimously conferred that title upon me. In common courtesy could I do less than acknowledge the compliment on my cards? Before that I was called the Frescoer from 'Frisco. When I leave this burgh I may be the Painter from Prospect, for all I know now," with a soft laugh.

All this was very plausible to one as well versed in the curious whims and fancies of the far-western sports, but Dudley Mann was not yet fully satisfied, and something of his suspicion showed itself in his words or tones as he asked what he could do to serve the gentleman.

"Take care of a little loose change for a day or so," was the light response as Andre Deutsch snapped his fingers with a glance toward his valet, who came shambling forward like a wandering ghost of misery and tribulations. "If not a man of business, I'm shrewd enough to make sure of a return ticket, in case my decorating proves more costly than usual. Sunday, pull your weasel!"

With a faint sigh Sunday obeyed, producing a plump pocketbook and taking from it a goodly roll of bank-notes. Like one who is loth to part from old friends, he dropped the money on the counter, falling back to his corner in obedience to a sign from his master.

"Please give me credit for this, Mr. Mann," was the easy continuation. "Subject to check, of course, as I'm not certain just how long I may care to remain in Prospect. And that reminds me—Mr. Corwin is not in at present?"

Even as he uttered the words a look of relief came into the face of the clerk, for he caught sight of Leonard Corwin just mounting the steps.

"You are fortunate, dear sir," he said, with a faint smile. "Yonder comes Mr. Corwin now!"

Andre Deutsch turned quickly toward the door, and the movement hid his face from the keenly curious gaze of the clerk.

CHAPTER IV.

"SLOPED WITH A HANDSOMER MAN."

DUDLEY MANN shifted his own position in the attempt to catch a fair view of that darkly handsome face, but he might have spared himself the trouble. There was absolutely nothing for him to discover there.

Andre Deutsch showed simply a languid curiosity in his face as he took note of the banker, a single glance summing up his outward points.

A man of not more than fifty years, well preserved in looks if not in figure, the latter being rather portly than otherwise. A strong, stern, yet not unkindly face, smoothly shaven save for modest "ear tabs" now slightly sprinkled with silver hairs. Blue eyes, shaded by heavy brows. A broad, high forehead, with just a hint of coming baldness. A composite nose, wide, thin-lipped mouth, strong chin, with

squared jaws, denoting an iron will and unflinching courage.

Leonard Corwin bowed slightly to the man who was gazing at him, but passed along to the back of the building without speaking.

Dudley Mann moved toward the rear of the bank as if to meet his employer beyond range of those ears, but without taking his watchful gaze from the comparatively unguarded money shelf below the counter.

"The gentleman claims to have business with you, sir, I believe," he hurriedly explained, handing the card to the banker. "That is his name, but—I think he'll bear watching a bit!"

Barely loud enough for these words to reach the ear of the one for whom they were intended, then Dudley once more drew near to the front end of the counter, quietly saying:

"Do you wish to speak to Mr. Corwin about this deposit, sir?"

"Why should I?" with arching brows. "All I want is to have it taken care of for a few days; a month or two, it may be; and surely you can serve me thus far?"

"Anything I can do, Mr. Mann?" asked the banker, coming forward.

Dudley fell back and to one side, leaving Andre Deutsch to repeat his wishes, which he did with just a touch of sarcasm in his tones.

"Simply an assurance that I will not linger long enough to become a charge on the town, dear sir. As for my poor card, which seems to have prejudiced Mr. Mann against me, why, that may be smoothed over by a single word from you. And I think you will find authority sufficient in this note to waste so much breath, Mr. Corwin."

He handed the banker an unsealed envelope, the writing on which seemed to strongly interest the elder man, judging from the keen manner in which he scrutinized it, turning aside to secure a more favorable light. When he turned again his eyes were glowing brightly, his coldness entirely gone, his voice ringing out like that of one both glad and proud to welcome the man who brought him such a missive.

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Deutsch!" he declared, warmly gripping the gloved hand across the counter. "I wish I had been here when you first entered, but we'll soon make that all right. Dudley," turning to his nephew while still retaining that hand, "this is a friend of my friend, and therefore a friend of the house."

Mann muttered something about his regret at having treated the gentlemen so coldly, but Deutsch waved it aside with a bland smile.

"Never mention it, dear boy! Idler though I be, I can understand how careful you business men have to be under all circumstances. For aught you knew I was a bank sneak, with my decoy yonder," laughing softly as he nodded toward Saul Sunday, who was still mechanically manipulating his shells in the corner.

"Open an account with Mr. Deutsch, Dudley," nodded Corwin, too true a business man to forget any detail. "Will you come with me, dear sir? We can talk more at ease in my private office, just back yonder."

Andre Deutsch smiled assent, passing down the counter, while Leonard Corwin kept pace on the inner side, smiling like one who had just been the recipient of a most joyous surprise.

His suspicions now wholly dissipated, Dudley Mann glanced curiously after the two men, possibly wondering what connection there could be between this professional sport and the staid banker.

If such were his thoughts, he could find no clew to fasten upon.

He had never heard the name before. He had never met the gentleman who called himself "The Decorator From Dead-Lift."

A heavy sigh near his elbow brought his eyes swiftly around, to note the tall, bony figure of Saul Sunday standing close to the counter, with his gaze fixed hungrily upon the little pile of bank-notes.

"Sufferin' grandpap!" sighed the valet, his pointed nose actually pressing between the painted wires forming the screen above the counter. "Jes' to see 'em! Jest to think how mighty much comfort a pore critter might squeeze out o' them all! An' him! Why, boss, he'll jest double 'em up an' throw 'em away fer the pure fun o' doin' of it!"

His peculiar voice sunk to an awed whisper as he uttered this last sentence, and his little gray eyes roved uneasily toward the rear room, though Banker Corwin had closed the door behind himself and his visitor.

Dudley Mann made no immediate response to this speech, his practiced fingers deftly counting the bills, even while he was summing up the strangely-garbed man before him.

If Andre Deutsch was fond of rather "loud" colors in his own garb, he had been even more liberal in providing Saul Sunday with a suit of livery. As for his taste, the less said the better perhaps.

From neck to knees Saul Sunday was clothed in velveteen; coat, waist-coat and small-clothes. The material was good, but of a flaming yellow, with huge, silver-plated buttons, and broad, braided edges in dead black. Each pocket was deeply bordered with black, with wide flaps.

From knees to ankles, his bony legs showed red as dye could color wool, and above each instep flashed a huge silver-plated buckle.

His linen seemed stiff as a board, bearing gaudily-colored figures of horses and jockeys engaged in a steeplechase. His collar was high, with long points, on each of which showed a gamecock in full feather. On his head rested a tall white felt hat, fashioned after the one of silk worn by his master, but bearing a wide mourning band.

Although a description has been given first of the dress, its wearer was scarcely less worth observing closely.

Saul Sunday was tall, and would have been taller but for his stooping shoulders. These lent him the air of one weighed down by grief, which impression was deepened by a glance at his melancholy visage.

His features were fairly good, though all of an elongated order, but taken as an entirety they seemed the very personification of deep, incurable woe and suffering. Even the thin, long, goat-like beard which tipped his pointed chin seemed a badge of mourning.

"Extravagant, is he?" ventured Mann, completing the count and looking up after making a note of the amount.

"Sufferin' grandpap!" breathed Saul Sunday, lifting his eyes to the ceiling and rising on his toes as though he could in no other position express his feelings. "Higher up then that, stranger, sir! They ain't no words into my talkin' stock as kin climb so fur up as to begin to tell how that—how the boss kin sling away the ding-bats when he gits good an' ready an' right in the notion! An' me—mournful Moses! ef I only jest hed a grip onto sech a roll as *that*, even! Ef I only *did*! Ef I only—an' yit, boss, sir, time was when I could strut an' crow an' ruffie it 'long o' the best o' the gay sports! Time was when 'tarnal sorer an' never-dyin' misery hedn't marked me fer its own soft-snap! Time was—But time is no longer, an' the best I kin do is—Hist!" he softly breathed, tapping his own lips with a bony finger as he glanced toward the rear room, at the same time tiptoeing to the opening in the wire screen, to thrust his head through, with:

"Mebbe you kin set me right, stranger! Mebbe you kin—mebbe you know whar she's hidin'? Glory Ann Sunday, sir. My wife—that was. Ef you only mought, boss!" with an almost piteous groan accompanying the last words, his little eyes filled with a yearning light as they held the gaze of the bank clerk.

"You are looking for some person?" stammered Mann, curiously impressed by this strange fellow's words and manner.

"Fer the woman that was my wife, boss," with a heavier sigh as he drew back a little, a shadow creeping over his gaunt visage as his possible hopes faded away before that puzzled gaze. "She run off one bitter black night—sloped with a handsomer man, the letter she left ahind on the table said."

"And you are searching for her, after such a parting?"

"I've got to!" groaned Saul Sunday, the picture of hopeless misery. "Long as I don't find her, I'm jest a white nigger in circus clothes!"

"You travel as a valet in order to cover more ground? Is that it?"

"Wuss luck then that, by a mighty heap, sir," replied Sunday, with a visible effort choking down his powerful emotions. "I travel like this beca'se I can't help myself! Beca'se that Dandy Dutch hes got a morgidge onto me, soul an' gizzard, body an' briches! An' it cain't never be lifted ontel I've found the woman who betrayed my trustful love an' heaped shame onto wrong ontel I hev to think twice afore I kin know my own face into the lookin'-glass!"

"Why don't you run away if the service is so distasteful?"

Saul Sunday drew his gaunt figure erect, his face full of sad reproach, his little eyes filling with an honest glow as he said:

"Low down as I be, stranger, I hain't quite that fallen. Though I'd heap rather go chaw bread fer sick monkeys into a reg'lar show then to walk the wide airth like this, I cain't go back onto my solemn word."

"Of course that's another matter," hurriedly murmured Mann, flushing guiltily before that earnest gaze. "If you have passed your word to serve Mr. Deutsch, you ought to keep it to the end."

"I did, sir, boss. Mebbe he was a bit hard onto me, seein' how low down in the ditch o' miseryation I was when he stuck out a paw to drag me to solid airth. I say *mebbe*, now I'm sobered down. I use stronger terms at odd spells, but even then I cain't wholly fergit that he *did* pull me out o' the mud. Still—I leave it to your own self, boss. I leave it to you ef it's the pure thing fer one man to rig a feller critter out so mighty like a 'Talian monkey. To tote him all the wide world over, huntin' fer Glory—lookin' fer a woman that mebbe is dead an' in—call it heaven, boss, fer time was when I called her a honey angel o' b'iled-down sweetness!"

Overcome by his emotions, Saul Sunday drew back and partly averted his face, surreptitiously drawing a gaudy sleeve across his nose.

This change of position brought him face to the window, out of which he gazed, blankly at first, but then with growing interest.

Hardly knowing what to think of this fellow, Dudley Mann was watching him closely, trying to decide whether he was more fool than rogue, thinking the while that master and man were admirably matched, by way of contrast. And as he watched he saw that growing interest in the gaunt face of Saul Sunday. It was the face of a man who sees something that excites a strong interest in his busy brain.

Dimly wondering what this might be, Mann altered his position so as to gain a fairer view of the street, when he too grew strongly interested in the movements of two persons who were approaching the bank.

"That cur!" he muttered, beneath his breath, as he recognized Major Holly Gardenhire. "And he has— You infernal scoundrel!"

He saw the major lift a vail and steal a kiss from the lips of the maiden whom he hoped to win for his own wife, and leaping through the opening, Dudley Mann dashed out the lower sash of the window, springing to the ground almost within arm's-length of the dastard and his shrinking, trembling victim.

"Down, you bound! into the gutter!" he raged, hurling Gardenhire backward and clasp- ing the almost fainting maiden in his strong arms.

CHAPTER V.

HOW THE MAJOR WAS SAT UPON.

MAJOR HOLLY GARDENHIRE surely must have discounted something of this sort when he yielded to temptation at sight of Dudley Mann inside the bank, yet he was wholly taken by surprise when that human catapult came through the window amidst a jingle of broken glass.

He was facing the door through which he expected his rival to emerge, ready to meet his attack with full or empty hands as that assault would justify, but this headlong haste disconcerted him, and before he could turn to meet it, the fierce grip of the bank clerk closed on his shoulder and hurled him into the gutter.

Fortunately for himself the major was protected from worse by the struggling of the maiden. Only by reaching across her shoulders could Dudley touch his rival, else that shove would have been a blow, and Gardenhire would not have been in such a hurry to regain his feet.

As it was the fall proved a severe one, and for a brief space the major lay gasping on the flinty ground, seeing more stars than his limited knowledge of astronomy could name or place.

Dudley Mann hardly gave the malicious little rascal a second look, for with a choking, sobbing cry Lida Corwin sprang into his eager arms, shivering like one with a severe chill, but making no attempt to ward off the hot kisses which her cousin rained upon her pale face.

"How could you—how dare he kiss you, Lida?" cried Mann, scarce conscious of the words that passed his lips as he recalled that maddening sight to which his attention had been called by the eager gaze of Saul Sunday.

"He said—he swore—"

"I'll kill you, dog, for daring to lay hands on a gentleman!"

The vicious speech came from the bearded lips of Major Gardenhire as a matter of course, and Lida broke off with a frightened shriek as she saw her late escort staggering to his feet from the gutter, the sunlight glancing brightly from the silver mountings of a revolver clasped in his right hand.

Dudley Mann also recognized his peril, but he could do naught to avert it, just then, hampered as he was by those clinging, loving arms.

"Unhand my promised bride, you beggar!" added Gardenhire, forgetting his usual cool prudence as he saw how surely his vengeance was within his grasp, and unable to refrain from giving his hated rival a bitter sting even in death.

"Sufferin' grandpap!" came a harsh, excited voice from just behind the little desperado, accompanied by a whistling sound as a polished staff shot forward to knock the dangerous weapon upward as it exploded to send its contents far away toward the misty clouds. "Bloody murder an' 'tarnal massacreation! Good Lawd! what is this world comin' to when weenty kids like you take to wearin' grown-up duds an' totin' a sure-enough gun! When little runts. Quit your kickin', sonny, 'less ye want five fingers fer a patch on the part you brush a chair with!"

That deft stroke with the staff had not only disarmed the major, but it had temporarily deprived him of the use of that hand, though no bones were broken. And before he could fully rally, Saul Sunday closed with him, handling him much as a giant might handle a child.

"Is this fair play?" raged the major, struggling to free himself from that grip. "Is this the way you—"

"It's business, sonny," coolly interposed the valet, whirling his captive around until his heels struck sharply against the lower step of the brief flight leading into the bank. "Take a

seat an' ketch your nat'ral breath, little runt—so!"

Saul Sunday deftly tripped his captive, laying him on the lower step, then using him as a cushioned seat while placidly watching the lovers just beyond.

"Never mind the ole man but go on with the pritty talk, boss," he nodded in calm approval of the methods which Dudley Mann was using to restore the almost swooning maiden. "Ef I'm lookin' on I ain't seein' nothin' nur even—Lay still, ye p'izen critter!" sharply tapping the major with his staff as that worthy strove to dislodge his weight. "Ef ye was to dump me in the gud-mutter an' daub up my rijimentals, the boss'd never for— Good Lawd!"

The bank door opened to give egress to the banker and his guest, and only by rapid work did Saul Sunday manage to escape being trodden underfoot. With a jerk and a scramble he cleared the steps with his charge, just in time, mechanically saluting his employer with his free hand.

"What's the racket, Sunday?" sharply demanded Deutsch, his black eyes glowing as though backed by living fire. "Who's that you've got there? What's he been trying to do?"

"Saultin' a female lady, sir, boss, an' then tryin' to salt a man fer 'fendin'— Stiddy, sonny!"

The last words were addressed to Major Gardenhire who made a vigorous effort to break away from that vise-like grip, muttering threats not loud but deep and thoroughly well meant.

Meanwhile Leonard Corwin had passed on to where his daughter was sobbing hysterically in the embrace of her cousin. For once in his life the staid, grave banker was thoroughly shaken, his pale face and husky voice betraying how intensely he loved his child, and how sorely the thought of peril to her had shaken his nerves.

"Take me away—let me go!" panted Lida, flushing hotly as she noted the rapidly gathering crowd, attracted to the spot by the pistol-shot. "I am not hurt, only—"

"What is it? What's it all about?" spluttered the banker, too greatly startled to read the signs as readily as a cooler man might have done. "If you're to blame, Dudley Mann, I'll—"

"Not him—that other—take me away, please!"

Lida shook her vail over her face and took a step or two toward the bank entrance. Then Dudley Mann lifted her lithe figure in his strong arms, bearing her within the building away from the curious gathering.

Leonard Corwin hurried after them, but Andre Deutsch paused long enough to smile blandly into the face of the major as he uttered:

"Don't you think you had better bear us company, my dear sir? You ought to be able to do a little explaining, and from all appearances, there will be considerable required."

"Ef he don't want to bear, I reckon he kin be borne, boss," faintly grinned Saul Sunday, as his grip tightened.

"Take your hand off or I'll kill you, rascal!" flashed Gardenhire.

Dandy Dutch, as Sunday had termed his master, lifted a gloved finger with a slight nod. Instantly the man in livery obeyed the silent command, releasing his captive, but keeping within reach.

"Your hands are free to begin the slaughter act, dear sir," bowed the sport, smiling even more sweetly than before. "Only—are you insured against lightning?"

The major frowned blackly as he saw how coolly Saul Sunday was balancing that silver-bound staff in his hands, and he had no great difficulty in interpreting that blind query.

Like magic his usual coolness returned. All anger seemed to vanish with the swift glance he cast around over the curious crowd, and smoothing down his disordered clothes, he quietly ascended the steps and entered the bank.

A sign from Dandy Dutch sent Saul Sunday close after, the sport pausing on the top step to blandly address the crowd below.

"False alarm, gentlemen, and the circus is over. Just a mouse, which a frightened lady naturally mistook for a roaring lion, seeking whom he might devour. Mouse crushed, lady abashed, and no gentleman will add to her embarrassment by lingering near. If any one else sees fit to do so, I'll be most happy to return and satisfy his curiosity to the best of my ability. Good-evening, gentlemen!"

With a profound bow, Andre Deutsch turned and entered the bank, closing and locking the door behind him, pulling down the blinds as he did so.

A single glance showed him the situation as he finished this.

Leonard Corwin was bending over his daughter, who half-reclined in a chair, silent now, though her figure was still trembling. Dudley Mann stood near, pale, stern, more than half angry at the harsh words which his uncle had used, yet plainly with thoughts only for his fair cousin.

Major Holly Gardenhire was coldly watching this group, his face expressionless, his eyes

nearly closed as though his usual squint had suddenly grown very much worse. And close at his shoulder towered Saul Sunday, staff in hand, a dull ferocity taking the place of the doleful dejection usually imprinted upon his long visage.

"What does it all mean, anyhow?" irritably demanded the banker, his worst fears vanishing as he saw that his daughter had received no material injury, physically speaking. "Confound it, boy!" frowning blackly upon his nephew, "can't you explain? What have you been doing to—"

"Trying to protect her from the dirty whelp you have seen fit to throw her in company with, sir!" flashed the young man, forgetting all prudence as he recalled that scene through the window. "Even you would hardly stand idly by to see her kissed against her will in broad daylight, and on the public street where—"

He stopped short in his impetuous speech as a sound drew his gaze toward the major himself. One instant in mad doubt, then he leaped forward with a hoarse, inarticulate cry, his hands outstretched to grapple with the insulter—only to be checked by Saul Sunday, whose staff barred the way, while he quickly asked:

"Shell I let him, boss?"

"Let him—and I'll blow him through the instant his hand touches my person!" coldly cried Gardenhire, slipping a hand into his bosom, where rested an ugly derringier.

Lida uttered a faint cry and rose to her feet, stretching out a hand toward her cousin. Corwin strode forward and forcibly jerked his nephew back, standing between the two angry men, glancing from face to face as he once more demanded an explanation.

"I decline to answer even you, Mr. Corwin, while that young ruffian is standing by," coldly responded the major, flashing a vicious glance toward his rival. "Send him away, and I'll give you the information you seek. Or—ask your daughter for her version. I am perfectly willing to be judged by her statement."

"No, no—spare him for my—"

"Enough, Miss Corwin," swiftly interposed Gardenhire, cutting the poor girl short before she could fully betray her secret in her sad agitation. "Your will is my law. I will obey, for a gentleman should know how to respect a lady's secret."

The major drew back a pace, crossing his arms over his swelling chest, his stature seeming to increase at least an inch as he delivered himself of this speech. It was meant to be very effective, but this was just a little marred by the soft laugh which bubbled from the red lips of the Decorator.

"Bring him a chair for a pedestal, Sunday," he murmured, in a theatrical aside. "What a pity the poor little devil isn't a foot nearer the size of a man!"

Gardenhire flushed hotly as these words met his ear, but he coldly added, still addressing himself to the banker:

"If the lady wishes, I will at any time explain all to you, sir. As for the rest," and his eyes roved quickly from face to face. "As for the rest, if they feel at all aggrieved at anything I may have said or done this day, a hint will suffice, and they will find me entirely at their service, night or day. Now—"

He was cut short by Dandy Dutch, whose gloved hand gently tapped his shoulder as its owner softly uttered:

"May I utter a word before you levant, dear sir?"

CHAPTER VI.

SOLENN SAUL'S MISSION.

MAJOR HOLLY GARDENHIRE shook that hand from his shoulder, frowning darkly as he confronted the bland sport.

"I do not know you, sir. I have no desire to be wiser either."

"If one could have all one wishes, and nothing but what one desired, what a paradise this world would become, to be sure!" laughed Deutsch, then adding briskly as he extended a bit of pasteboard similar to that which had startled Dudley Mann: "My card, major. I room at the Occidental. Office hours such as best suits your leisure, and terms your own. Charge all to me, and present your bill as soon as you see fit."

Gardenhire dropped the card after a single glance, his eyes glittering through his nearly closed lids as they swept over the face of the Jewish-looking sport.

"I don't know what you are trying to get through you, but—"

"My valet tumbled you in the dirt, I believe? At any rate, he used you as a cushion, and your wardrobe looks a little the worse for wear. Sollemn Saul Sunday is a nuisance—granted. But Sollemn Saul Sunday is in my employ. Consequently, I am responsible for whatever damage he may do. He has damaged you—in dignity if not in purse. So—see? Shall expect you at an early date, dear sir. Until then, ta-ta! Saul Sunday, show the major out!"

"Yes, sir; this way, sir," bowed the man in livery, a bony hand clutching on an arm of the little major, and forcing him to the door.

Sollemn Saul turned the key, and thrust his

charge through the opened way, following him to the steps, and huskily whispering in his ear:

"I don't reckon you kin tell a poor miseryfied critter where he mought find his lost Glory Ann? Ef you could jest—"

"Look out that I don't send you to glory, free of charge, you yellow cur!" snarled the major, wresting himself free, and hastily descending the steps, pausing only long enough to flash an ugly glance through the shattered window.

Meanwhile there was silence within the bank, even glib-tongued Andre Deutsch feeling disinclined to talk much just then. And softly whispering just above his breath, the Decorator from Dead-Lift stood with his back toward the trio, gazing with deepest interest at an engraving depending from the wall.

Leonard Corwin had drawn a little back from his daughter and his nephew, his brows wrinkled, his lips tightly closed, an angry and troubled light in his eyes.

Dudley was sullenly silent. Lida was plainly frightened. And Solemn Saul looked as uneasy as a fish out of water, when he returned after ushering Major Holly Gardenhire down the steps.

Dandy Dutch seemed to divine the situation, turned though his back was toward the group, for, after a period of silence, he turned briskly.

"Awfully cheeky, isn't it, for a stranger to chip in so brash?" he ventured, with a smile that robbed his speech of half its bluntness, as he added: "But a spell seems to have dropped over you all, and neither of you gentlemen can see how deeply Miss Corwin is suffering from over-excitement. So, wouldn't it be best to get her safely home?"

"Yes—take me home, papa!" Lida sobbed, rising from her seat and clasping her trembling hands on the banker's arm. "I feel so strangely that—I fear I am going to be ill!"

"Shall I send for a carriage? Saul, you rascal!"

"Yes, sir, boss!"

But before Dandy Dutch could add to his order, Lida herself checked him, declaring that it was not necessary.

"I would rather walk. You can go with me, father?"

In her eagerness to postpone the explanation which she saw would be sought by her father of her cousin, Lida almost defeated her own hopes, but Dandy Dutch proved an invaluable ally just then, bustling around as busy as a bee, going himself for the banker's hat and cane, barely granting him time to put these on and say a few words to Dudley Mann before hurrying them out upon the street.

Those few words contained instructions to have the broken window repaired temporarily at once, and with anything but an amiable expression resting on his face the bank clerk watched the little party move away.

"I'll act as body-guard, you know," laughed Dandy Dutch as they reached the street. "A terrible fellow, that man-of-war, but I'll see that he does not venture too close to my precious convoy. Saul!"

"Yes, sir, boss!"

"Break your staff over the first head that dares come within its sweep! Break it in seventeen pieces, if less won't do!"

"Ef I only mought!" groaned the man in livery, holding the staff at arm's length and dolefully scowling at it. "I'd borry my own pate fer the thing to crack it over ef you'd only let me do it!"

"Too soft, Sunday, by half," gravely nodded the Decorator. "Your parents should have baked it harder while you were young. Tell 'em so with my compliments, will you?"

"Ef I'm lucky enough fer to take that road, boss, sir," meekly muttered the man of sorrow, with a fleeting glance upward.

Dandy Dutch talked briskly, lightly, incessantly, but confining his remarks solely to the banker as they walked on. There was no particular point to what he said, but Lida felt very grateful to him. She knew his main purpose was to distract attention from herself until she could recover her usual clearness of brain.

Busily as his tongue was wagging, the Decorator had eyes for all around him, as was presently proven. He dropped back a pace as they were passing opposite a saloon across the way, hurriedly whispering:

"The fellow has just slipped in that den. Go after him, and see that you bring him to my room at the hotel. Off with you, now!"

He resumed his position beside the banker's daughter, and his perfect trust in his valet was evidenced by the fact that he did not even cast a glance after Solemn Saul as that yellow apparition strode across the street to enter the designated saloon.

Saul Sunday paused just inside the door, glancing keenly around the room, noting each person present and evidently forming no very favorable opinion of the place from its *habitués*.

There were half a dozen men in the room besides the presiding genius behind the bar, and each pair of eyes were turned wonderingly toward that gorgeous vision as it half-filled the open passage. In silence at first, but then one burly fellow blurted out:

"Waal I will be durned!"

"Stick out a finger an' see ef it'll bite!" quavered another, slipping behind the burly fellow and peering over his shoulder in mock affright.

"Cheese it, gents!" sharply uttered the barkeeper. "It's only dry, and wants a drink—can't you see?"

Solemn Saul shot a quick glance over his shoulder, like one who fears he is being watched, then a ghostly smile crept across his gaunt visage and the back of a bony hand was drawn across his lips as he strode up to the bar.

"Pizen, boss, an' hot as hotter ef you've got it handy! 'Tain't often I git a chainece fer to drink, an' when I do I want it to scratch all the way down, an' stay a-kickin' when it gits thar!"

"Certainly, sir," bowed the barkeeper, briskly setting out a bottle and a number of glasses. "Didn't I tell you so, gents? I knew how it was from the cut of his jib. Rest of the band long behind, sir?"

"Rest of—eh?"

"New thing out this way, sir, but bound to take. Knock 'em stiff, will the parade, even without the bearskin hat. Never had the Eastern frills before, but we're growing to it—growing in a mighty hurry, is Prospect. Skim the cream, you will, if the rest of the band pans out as rich as the sample—yes, sir!"

Solemn Saul stared blankly at the speaker, then looked into his nearly-filled glass, shaking his head with a faint sigh as he replaced the latter on the bar without tasting its contents.

"Anything wrong, major? Surely you don't want to spoil it with water?"

"Does it 'fect everybody the same way, boss? I'm dry as a fish in pickle, an' I thought it'd be jest a little ole heaven on airth ef I could climb on the outside of a good squar' snort, but—reckon I'll wait a weenty bit longer! I'm miseryf'ull 'nough now, 'ithout goin' clean crazy jest fer drink!"

Solemn Saul edged away from the bar, glancing from face to face of the self-invited bibbers as they emptied their glasses, his own countenance the picture of disgusted awe.

It was the turn of the saloon-keeper to stare blankly, but one of the others, a trim-built, shabbily-dressed sport, laughed aloud, then said:

"It's boss and boss, with the deal against Mose. He took you for a drum-major, stranger, or the leader of a brass band. You thought he was off his nut, through drinking his own pizen. Isn't that it?"

"Look at his rig-out!" frowned the barkeeper. "Isn't that enough to give a man the jim-jams and make him think almost anything?"

Solemn Saul caught up the glass of liquor and emptied it at a swallow, heaving a mighty sigh of relief as he realized the mistake into which the barkeeper had unwittingly led him.

"'Nough to make a body dream o' 'Talian monkeys an' lunatic 'sylvans out on a holiday spree, ain't it?" he dolefully uttered, ranging his eyes over as much of his person as he conveniently could without dislocating his neck. "Think I'd do it ef I was my own man? Reckon I'd keep on givin' little dogs fits an' fits ef I could play any other way? Then you don't know me ef you do!"

"What sort of a fake is it, anyway?" curiously asked the gambler, who proved to be none other than the man whom Dandy Dutch had bidden Saul fetch to his rooms at the hotel. "I saw you last night at the Oasis, along with a Sheeny—wasn't it?"

Solemn Saul gazed reproachfully at the speaker; a man of middle age and medium size, with a peculiar countenance. His under jaw projected so far beyond its mate that his teeth were always visible, and at times seemed in the act of eating his upper lips. His cheek-bones were high and prominent, his little, deep set eyes of a yellowish green, his nose a diminutive pug, turning up so sharply at the end as to give one the impression that it had taken affright at those menacing teeth.

So pronounced a peculiarity could not escape being marked, and as "Under-shot" Dan Frick the seedy gambler was known throughout Prospect.

"It's heap sight wuss then a fake, pardner," sadly uttered the man of many woes, shaking his head from side to side as he leaned heavily on his staff while waiting for the barkeeper to make change. "It's a cuss sot onto me fer the sins of another which—Mebbe you kin tell me whar I mought come acrost her?" his melancholy visage lightening up for the moment. "Glory Ann—Glory Ann Sunday it used to be, 'fore she sloped with a handsomer man. Glory Ann Piety I reckon it is now, for that was the snake in the underbresh—Preserved Polycarp Piety, to spell it out in full—as 'witched her away from her lovin' husband that paid ten round dollars to the dominie fer to do the hitch-in' that was to last through sickness an' death an'—"

Strong emotion choked him, and the poor fellow leaned even more heavily on his staff, until the silver band gave way beneath his grip and suffered the velvet table to appear as if by magic.

"No fake, eh?" laughed Under-shot Dan, derisively, as he pointed at the transformed staff.

"Out with the shells, pardner, and show Moses

yet another wrinkle from the effete Eastern Slope!"

But Solemn Saul closed his table with a sharp click, driving its spike into the floor and leaving it to stand of itself as he strode forward and closed a strong hand on the gambler's shoulder, saying:

"I want you, Daniel Frick!"

CHAPTER VII.

SOLEMN SAUL PLAYS PACK-MULE.

INTENTIONALLY or by chance Solemn Saul made use of that formula so dreaded by law-breakers, and it was almost laughable to see how his words and actions affected his present companions.

Under-shot Dan actually "wilted" beneath his touch, while his comrades shrunk away from both as though they feared mortal contagion.

"What—what for?" quavered the man with the misfit jaws, his green eyes darting a brief glance up into that gaunt visage.

"Fer rocks an' dingbats an' boodle an' the likes o' them," came the prompt response, as Saul Sunday relaxed his grip. "Fer big pay ef the boss is in good humor, an' you come up to the chalk-mark sot down into his 'magination, an' you don't make no slips nur—eh?"

"Show your warrant or climb out o' this!" harshly cried the barkeeper, tightening his grip on the neck of a bottle and sliding along toward the open end of the bar. "He isn't pritty for looks, but you can't pull a friend of mine without leave or license—eh, boys?"

Solemn Saul stared with drooping jaw at the speaker, dull wonder showing in every feature until even Frick broke into a sickly laugh as he felt himself safely out of that grip.

"Got 'em ag'in!" softly breathed the man in livery, shaking his head in owlsh gravity. "Wonder is that why a doctor won't never physic his own self? Wonder ef—Wait a weenty bit, pardner!"

Under-shot Dan improved his chance to reach a rear door, through which he could dodge at will, then pause to look over a shoulder as Solemn Saul lifted his voice in that appeal.

The color had returned to the gambler's face, and there was a sullen resentment coming into his green eyes as he felt how awkwardly he had exposed his inmost fears.

"Who was your dog last year this time?" he snarled, his teeth more prominent than ever as his lips curled back.

Saul Sunday breathed a heavy sigh as he fell back to where his staff stood upright in the floor, his long fingers mechanically playing with the bright silver band that held the little table closed. His whole attitude was that of a man bowed down by hopeless grief. His voice fairly dripped incurable woe with every syllable.

"Me an' my time don't begin to be nigh out yit. A yaller dog at that! All it lacks is a tin kittle full o' stones an' a stout string! An' them I'm lookin' fer this every minnit—wuss luck me!"

With a most doleful groan the man in yellow livery slid down the silver band, opening wide the miniature table, producing from his pockets the shells and the little joker, seemingly forgetting what he had set out to accomplish, lost in his own misery.

"Nickels, dimes an' dollars!" he feebly murmured, drooping over his ingenious outfit like one in the last stages of woe, but with mechanically deft fingers, whose movements bade defiance to the sharpest eye. "Take keer o' the pennies an' let the other feller rake in the pounds an' take the kickin's. Shove yer ducats in the bank that never yit went broke, an' when a wet spell comes onto ye, you'll hev the consolation o' knowin' right whar your good money is—even ef you can't pull it out ag'in! Here she goes an' thar she am. Over an'—Now ye see whar the yaller dog comes in, pardner!" he sighed, as he deftly closed up his table and gazed gloomily into the half-scared, half-wondering countenance of the seedy gambler.

"This isn't putting no shingles onto my roof," sourly said the proprietor, who seemed to have taken a peculiar dislike to the stranger whose remarkable appearance had led to a mistake which turned the laugh against the house. "If you want to run the place, hadn't you better buy me out first?"

"Ef it was all that easy you wouldn't ketch me kickin' so loud," said Solemn Saul, tossing a coin upon the counter. "The boss foots the bills, an' that's the one comfort as leaves life a-tall wuth livin'. Even ef a pore critter hes to keep wipin' the salty tears o' never-dyin' miseryation out o' both eyes to oncet, he kin make hisself b'lieve two an' two makes six, an' plant the extry in his own private money-bank. So—pizen the gents once more, jest fer luck!"

By this time even the most suspicious had grown convinced this odd genius was anything but an emissary of the law, and while emptying their glasses more than one rough jest was shaped at the expense of Daniel Frick.

Saul Sunday sighed softly as he gazed into that anger-flushed countenance, and there was a melancholy sympathy in his tones as he ventured to add:

"I kin feel fer ye, pardner, fer when I was young an' in my prime, I've bin right thar, many's the time! I reckon it was them old mem'ries that made my words take that shape. I never knowed anythin' as could make a critter melt an' try to run down in his boots as them!"

"It was your breath that paralyzed me, not your touch or your words," roughly retorted Frick.

"They was onions in the hash, mebbe," sighed Sunday, meekly tugging at his goat-like beard. "But that hadn't ought to be laid up ag'inst me, pardner, or make you kick over the traces when—it's the boss that wants to see ye, Dan'el."

"Then let the boss call at my office," snapped the gambler, his green eyes shifting uneasily once more. "What's your boss to me or I to your boss? Ain't one two-legged pet enough for him to lug about?"

Solemn Saul ventured on a feeble smile as he glanced over that ugly countenance, and he meekly uttered:

"It'd save me a heap o' lookin' at, an' that'd be some weenty comfort in life fer a man that's nat'ally too modest fer to use a lookin' glass when he wants to shave his own self. But—don't you think it, stranger! An' ef you do, don't give way to temptation or you'll ferever an' ever wish you didn't hed!"

"Not that he's a hard boss to sarve, as bosses go. Not but what the pickin's is good an' fattenin' enough to suit a hog. But—me an' you would hev to bunk together, nights, an' fu'st we knowed I'd let slip your wind jest to give the law a chance fer to keep me from doin' suicide onto my own self!"

A rather roundabout method of carrying out the instructions given him by that master, one would think at first glance, but Solemn Saul felt that he was acting all for the best. His unlucky address had frightened Daniel Frick, and that worthy had not yet fully recovered, though these enigmatical sentences were awakening his curiosity in no slight degree.

"What sort of game is your boss running, anyway?" he ventured.

"The heaviest game in town, as a rule, an' he never stops or lets up until it's run clean dry or his weasel-skin gives out. More times'n one this back o' mine has groaned out loud to marcy that it didn't snap like a dry twig with the dead load o' ducats I hed to tote hum after a night-long buckin' o' the tiger an'—but that ain't business, nur what fetched me over this way, pardner," abruptly changing his manner from boasting to calm dejection. "The boss wants you, Dan'el."

"Let the boss come for me, then!"

"But the boss done tole me go fetch, Dan'el, an' what the boss says is heap more'n law an' gospel to sech as me. Sorry, Dan'el, but you've got to go. 'Live an' not kickin' ef you're wise; dead an' still never usin' your heels, ef you're foolish; but go 'long you must!' equably declared the man in yellow.

"How'll you make me, then?" surlily scowled the gambler, a hand slipping under his coat with an ugly significance.

Solemn Saul apparently failed to notice the movement, for he never altered his tones in the least, as he turned to his staff, opening it and spreading his implements on the velvet before adding:

"It's a heap o' tronble, but I hate to spill the ruby, Dan'el, an' I won't do it ef they's any lawful way o' gittin' 'round it. Now—you're a sport. You'd rather bet an' lose then not bet an' keep your good ducats. You'd even buck ag'inst 'nother man's game rather than go rusty fer want o' exercise that way. Look, Dan'el!" and he caused a number of coin to jingle in his capacious palm.

"Pick out the little joker an' the ducats is yours. Miss it, an' you let me take you to see what job the boss is got on file fer you."

Without pausing for an answer the thimble-rigger deftly manipulated his tools, droning forth his set phrases the while, then giving his long fingers a flourish in the air as he left the three shells ranged in an even row on the velvet.

It seemed the perfection of art, and yet Frick could have made oath he saw one of the shells rest its edge for the fraction of a second on the little black pea before settling down even with the cloth. And though he knew the "mighty unsart'in" game of old, his gambling instinct proved too much for his prudence, and he caught up the shell with a laugh—to drop it with an oath, for the little joker had vanished!

"Sold ag'in an' this is the how!" chuckled Solemn Saul, deftly dropping the pea from under a curved fingernail, then closing his table and pocketing his other tools as he added: "Said I'd fool your eyes ef I could, an' the wu'st enemy I ever hed dared hint I was a liar in the same township. But that don't count. Come, pardner!"

Under-shot had dropped into a chair, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, doggedly grinning:

"Take me, critter. I didn't bet I'd go on my own legs. Tote me if you like. I ain't caring whether you do or not!"

Solemn Saul flushed hotly as the others burst into a laugh as they witnessed his discomfiture,

and his manner was melancholy itself as he spread out his hands and whined:

"Be I all growed to ears? Do I look like a john-donkey?"

"That's all right," nodded Frick, carelessly. "I pay if I lose, but I pay in my own way. Send for a barouche if you'd rather, but I'm saving my boot-leather just now."

Solemn Saul gazed around the room in apparent dismay, but then his eye caught a glitter as they rested on a small coil of rope near the end of the counter, and flipping a coin to the proprietor he snatched up this and deftly bound his prize, hand and foot, despite Frick's efforts to the contrary, amid the boisterous laughter of his mates, who seemed to hugely enjoy the joke at his expense.

"The easier you take it, the sooner the eend'll come to ye, pardner," was his grave observation as he rose from his difficult task, leaving the gambler lying helpless on the sanded floor. "It was your own choosin', an' I ain't the sort o' critter to kick ag'inst that. But I do say this much: durn a town whar a pore, weak, mis'able, down-trodden human bein' hes to be his own pack-mule an' 'livery-wagon b'iled down into one!"

"Let me up, and I'll go like a lamb," muttered Frick, but Solemn Saul grimly shook his head in dissent.

"Would like it mighty sight better, pardner, but a bet is a bet, an' you lost it that way. More fool me fer not hev'in' it fully understood at the jump-off, but—Stiddy, pardner, ef you don't want to ride head-down an' heels top-most!"

While speaking thus Saul Sunday thrust the top of his stout staff between the legs of his unwilling captive, then with a mighty heave and a gasping cry from Frick, he hoisted the gambler from the floor, resting the staff across his shoulder, and striding from the saloon into the street, grimly cautioning his burden to maintain his balance.

"Top-side down or bottom-side up you've got to make the trip, pardner, fer the boss is waitin', an' when he b'iles over it's mighty apt fer to scald somebody. I'm used to it, but it mought hurt you!"

Seeing the uselessness of "kicking," Under-shot Dan steadied himself as best he could, a grin of mingled shame and defiance on his homely features as the gathering crowd hooted and cheered. And grave as a professional mute, Solemn Saul made his way down the middle of the street.

CHAPTER VIII.

DANDY DUTCH WANTS TO KNOW.

THE Jewish-appearing sport who had given the somewhat extravagant title of "Decorator from Dead-lift," was sitting on the wide veranda which ran along the front of the frame building dignified by the name of "Occidental Hotel," lazily enjoying his cigar, when the loud laughter and cheers of the crowd called his attention up the street. At first he could not exactly distinguish what was in the wind, but then a frown came over his darkly handsome face as he recognized the brilliant livery of his servant, Saul Sunday.

"What in time—well, that is one way of doing it!" he muttered, as he recognized his heavily-laden valet and saw what was winning this noisy escort.

The picture of grimly-resigned melancholy, Solemn Saul trudged along, bare-headed now, for Under-shot Dan was trying to make the best of a bad bargain, and had contrived to free one hand. With this he robbed his human beast of burden of his tall hat, cocking it upon his own head, then steadied himself by a tight grip on the long, flaxen locks of hair thus exposed to the breeze.

But, after all, it was poor bravado, and he caught his breath with an air of relief as Solemn Saul dumped him on the porch beside the Decorator from Dead-lift.

"Done fetched him, boss, sir, your Honor," dolefully uttered the valet, saluting. "Shell I ontie the critter, or let him stop hopped?"

"Release him, by all means, Sunday," nodded Deutsch, with difficulty holding his risibles in check. "You have done well. Jog my memory when next pay-day comes, please."

"Ef I'm still livin'!" faintly murmured the man of many woes, bending over the helpless gambler and cutting his bonds. "Jest now they's a mighty goneness 'round the heart o' me, which—"

"Fill it up at the bar, Sunday," nodded the sport, then leisurely scanning the gambler as that worthy rose to his feet.

"Fun alive, isn't it?" Frick asked, forcing a grin that served to emphasize his deformity. "Who's going to pay for this little ride of mine, I'd like to know?"

"Sunday never charges for his services without my permission, dear fellow," blandly smiled Deutsch, tossing the end of his cigar over the railing and rising to his feet. "May you live and grow handsome until he hands in a bill for bringing you hither!"

"Make the most of it," sullenly growled Frick, with an evil glance out of the corner of

his green eyes. "You're on top just now, but the wheel keeps on turning, and in time—"

"If you hold a grudge, dear boy, wreak it at once, Sunday!"

"Yes, sir, boss!"

"This gentleman wants to thrash you for giving him a free ride!"

"Shell I take my rijimentals off, boss?" soberly asked the valet. "Broken hide kin grow over, an' flesh heal itself, but they cain't any other sech a rig be hatched up in ten States—good luck, too!"

The last words came in a spiteful thankfulness, if the paradox be allowable, and even Frick gave a ghastly smile at the outbreak, while Dandy Dutch laughed merrily before adding:

"Never mind the livery, Sunday. If it isn't exactly suitable to your complexion, that's the fault of your ancestors, not the combination. You ought to feel as gay as a big sunflower, for I'm sure you look like one!"

With that speech his gravity returned and he spoke politely to the crestfallen gambler:

"Make out your bill and add the proper salve for your injured sensibilities, dear sir. I wanted to have a bit of a talk with you, and was too busy just then to write a proper invitation. I sent my valet, as the next best thing. The poor fellow means well, but—you know?" and he gently tapped his forehead with a finger-tip to point his meaning. "Rooms to rent, and like that, you know!"

"Well, if there's money in it," hesitated Frick.

"There is a stake big enough to let you buck the tiger on your own account in place of roping-in, Mr. Frick," smiled Dandy Deutsch, at the same time slipping a hand through the arm of the gambler and leading him from the veranda into the office of the hotel.

At a nod from his master, Saul Sunday procured a key from the clerk, then gloomily led the way up-stairs, unlocking and flinging open a door to the left of the usual long corridor.

Under-shot Dan entered without hesitation, for by this time he had decided that there could be no possible harm intended him, else the sport would have chosen his time when fewer eyes were ready to catch up the slightest prospect for amusement.

The chamber was fairly large, supplied with a table and several chairs in addition to a single bed and the ordinary furniture to be found in a third or fourth-rate hotel.

Saul Sunday placed chairs for his master and guest near the table, then produced a box of cigars and liquor, duly flanked by glasses. This done he fell back, his eyes downcast, his gaunt visage gloomier than ever, if that was possible.

"All this is a little irregular, perhaps, Mr. Frick," said Dandy Dutch, after filling a glass and pushing the cigars nearer his guest. "But it's a failing of mine to jump over all iron-clad rules. If I hadn't been born different—if it wasn't for golden spoon and all that, you know—I would have been an outlaw, pure and simple. As it is, I'm a sport, by choice and by nature. And if ever my luck deserts me for good-and-all, I'll drift clear over the line along which I try my level best to walk with one foot over the danger edge."

"All of which means?" ventured Frick, shooting a green ray over the rim of his glass.

"That you mustn't get huffy over my free-and-easy manner, dear fellow," smiled the Decorator, with a glance toward the open window. "If you should—well, one of us would go out that hole in the wall to mash some poor devil's hat below!"

Frick shivered uneasily and replaced his still full glass on the table. He looked like one who most sincerely wished himself in a far different situation, but who was too diffident to even hint at as much.

"But there's precious little danger of that coming to pass, I feel perfectly sure," sweetly added the Decorator as he struck a match and ignited a cigar. "You're a sport, as well. You are willing to post a brother on matters where ignorance is anything but bliss. Now—what sort of game is run at the Oasis?"

"Square as you'll find in the Territory, sir!" was the instant response, and Frick seemed greatly relieved at the abrupt turn the conversation had taken. "The usual percentage is enough for a hog, and Aubrey Conyers is a gentleman, as white as they make 'em to-day!"

"How much does he pay you for blowing his horn, Daniel?" lazily smiled the Decorator through his cigar smoke.

"Not a red, because he don't have to have cappers or ropers," was the earnest response. "That's all well enough in the East, where players are scarcer than games, but out here—well, you ought to know how it is yourself, sir!"

"Perhaps I wanted to make sure you knew, Frick," laughed Deutsch. "Say Aubrey Conyers is all right, then. Say he is content to take his percentage and let his patrons have the ghost of a show for their hard dollars. Then—what is this I hear about a daisy dealer?"

"I don't know just what you've heard,"

hesitated the gambler, with a shy glance from his green eyes which Deutsch apparently failed to notice. "I suppose you mean La Masque?"

Dandy Dutch nodded assent, holding his glass up between his eyes and the light sifting through the western window.

"One of the sort we read about, eh?" he drawled, carelessly. "Built on the Lightning Kate style?"

Under-shot Dan hesitated, like one who hardly knows what words to call into play. But Dandy Dutch made no offer to assist him, and he ultimately said:

"She's a bit of a mystery, even to we fellows who hang around the shebang pretty regularly, sir. I, for one, never caught sight of her face or heard her utter a word more than she was compelled to utter in settling an odd dispute over a stake or two. Then—well, it sounded more like liquid ice than anything else I can think of, just now!"

"Single, or under matrimonial bonds?"

"Single, so far as I can guess."

"And never shows her face?" mused Dandy Dutch, stifling a yawn as though attacked by sudden weariness. "That means elderly and faded, or naturally homely. Let La Masque retain her incognito, Daniel!"

"Be sure I'll never try to lift it," with a short, harsh laugh and significant shrug of the shoulders. "I saw Jimmy the Dude laid out for the cooling-board, and he only tried to raise that velvet mask."

"And the sport they call Major Holly Gardenhire? A sort of sleeping partner in the Oasis, isn't he?"

"Not that I know o'," and the gambler opened his eye widely in surprise at the idea. "What makes you think that, sir?"

"Didn't somebody say as much last night, Sunday?"

"Ef you think so, sir, boss," meekly responded the valet.

"Never mind; I dare say it was only fancy. But I surely heard something said concerning a fellow known as Captain Vampire, who had a lot of rascals whom he called his Bats."

Under-shot Dan cast a nervous glance around the room, his voice barely audible as he muttered:

"A gang of road-agents, sir, but the less said against them the safer I'll feel when once out of these four walls!"

"A bloody monster, eh?" with a soft laugh. "All right. I just wanted to know whether there was any foundation for the rumors. If I go broke under the glorious eyes and snowy hands of La Masque, maybe I can make a stake by pulling this Vampire and his Bats!"

"I'd rather you spoke the words than me, even in jest, sir!" muttered Frick, shivering as with a sudden chill, even while brushing the sweat from his low brow with a hand that visibly trembled. "Don't let it get out that I told you even so much, please, and I'll call it square without asking a red for what that fellow made me suffer!"

"You're perfectly secure while in this room, dear lad," laughed the Decorator, lightly, but adding with sudden gravity: "Every word you utter here shall be deemed a sacred secret, both on my part and on the part of my valet, Saul!"

"Yes, sir, boss!"

"Shut your ears and go to sleep!"

"I couldn't hear a thunderclap nor see the flash of it was to swinge my winkers, sir, boss, your Honor!" gravely declared that worthy.

"All I ask of you can do the Bat king no material injury, Daniel," quietly resumed the Decorator. "Simply tell me what sort of fellow he is, as well as you can. Of course you never met the gentleman?"

The gambler shook his head in dissent, and when he spoke it was in still lower tones, though he could convey but little information which was of value.

All he knew was that such a gang infested the roads leading to Prospect, and that no one had succeeded in trapping the outlaw, though more attempts than one had been made. He could not even say whether Captain Vampire was a giant or a dwarf, for he was described as being both the one and the other.

"After all, it is hardly worth speculating about," yawned Dandy Dutch, pushing back his chair. "I'll not tackle him while my good luck holds out. Sunday, wake up!"

"Done wide woke a'ready, sir, boss!"

"Pay this gentleman his price, and beg his pardon for not having treated him more gently. Good-evening, Mr. Frick! Hope to see you later."

CHAPTER IX.

IN SEARCH OF THE ELEPHANT.

"JUST a little side-show of his own, gentlemen," half-yawned the Decorator, with a lazy glance of his brilliant orbs toward that vision in yellow and black. "There's a woman in it, I believe, and the poor devil means no harm. Still—Sunday!"

"Yes, sir, boss, your Honor!"

"You're an infernal nuisance, Sunday!"

"Yes, sir, boss."

"Get somebody to kick you out, Sunday. Find out how much it costs and pay the bill. Sunday!"

"Good Lawd—yes, sir!"

"My nostrils begin to tickle. Prepare to sneeze, Sunday!"

If the man of many woes made any reply to this languid command, it was lost amid the chorus of laughter which just then burst forth, but his gaunt visage was expressive enough for a round dozen.

If ever a mortal was thoroughly tired of living, that being was the Sad Man from San Saba.

Dandy Dutch stood with arched brows, lips slightly parted, lazy expectation pictured on his darkly handsome face, but then a faint shade of reproach crept over it, and he shook his head gravely toward his valet.

"You're a fraud, Sunday! You ate up that snuff, or else pawned it for a drink. Remind me in the morning to—"

Solemn Saul sprung into active life and action, jerking forth a little box which, in his frantic haste, flew open and scattered its pungent contents freely about the room. And then, himself leading the ridiculous chorus, ample amends were made for Saul Sunday's omission.

As soon as possible, for he had not been slighted among the others, Andre Deutsch apologized for the clumsiness of his valet, seemingly deeply mortified by the *contretemps*.

And yet, taken all together, he could hardly have contrived a better or shrewder method of introducing himself to the good grades of the patrons of Aubrey Conyers's Oasis.

If some few eyed him with vague suspicion, scenting a mystery, under this by-play, by far the larger number took it as it fell, seeing in Dandy Dutch only a hair-brained sport, who sought notoriety at the risk of his reputation for good sense.

Quite early in the evening the Decorator, followed by his brilliant-garbed servitor, entered the spacious building known as the Oasis, saloon and gambling rooms, owned and run by Aubrey Conyers. Early as was the hour, the saloon was fairly well patronized, and from beyond the rich drapery which reached from ceiling to floor, one could catch occasional sounds telling of playing already under way.

As usual, Saul Sunday carried his staff, but as Dandy Dutch signed him toward a corner, the valet soon disburdened himself of this, slipping a little roll of posters from his pocket and tacking several of them upon the wall, sighing dolefully as he drew back to note the effect.

"Tain't no use, but it helps to fill up time an'— Take one, sir, boss?" interrupting himself to thrust a bill into the hand of one who drew near to see what the notices meant. "Ef you only could give a pore, weary, heart-broken feller-bein' even the ghost of a idee whar he mought jump the stray, sir! Ef you kin only say which way I want to go to head 'em off."

"Who's Glory Ann?"

"The wife o' my buzzom that used to was, sir," groaned the man of unlimited woe as he gazed gloomily upon the poster that described his erring life-partner and her reckless escapade. "Paid ten round silver cart-wheels fer to git hitched, an' then she sloped with a handsomer man, 'cordin' to her own words. Run away with Preserved Polycarp Piety. An' him no taller'n a—"

Saul Sunday closed his lank jaws with a startled click, for just then it was that the Decorator from Dead-lift sharply called his name.

"I keep the rascal by way of a tonic!" laughed Dandy Dutch, wiping his eyes as he smothered an incipient sneeze. "One never knows what fool-trick he'll be trying on next, and the doubt serves to keep one's blood flowing. Of course he's a nuisance. Of course he costs me more than his carcass is worth every day in the year. Of course he makes things a little annoying for my neighbors sometimes. But even that has its advantages, you know. It's so much less trouble to have the other fellow find excuses for kicking up a bobby!"

The laugh that followed this speech was hardly as hearty as that which had gone before. There was a languid insolence in his tones, in his gaze as he leisurely scanned the faces around him, that left an unpleasant taste in the mouth, so to speak.

Dandy Dutch showed his white teeth in a bland smile as he divined something of this, and lightly waved a beringed hand, as he added:

"Not a chief, gentlemen, unless some of you really think I meant to tread on your toes. Then—well, it's a heap less trouble to fight than to make an apology."

"We never talk fight in this establishment, sir!" gravely interposed a tall, well-dressed man, who just passed through the hanging curtains which helped to separate the saloon from the space devoted to cards and gambling. "I trust you have no complaint to make against the manner in which you have been received in the Oasis, sir?"

"Not I, Mr. Conyers!" frankly cried the sport from Dead-lift. "I never felt nearer heaven than I am just at present, but I didn't know how

things stood with the other sports. So—you see?"

Saul Sunday strode forward and silently thrust one of his bills into the white hand of the athlete gambler, meekly bowing an apology the while.

"Scuse me, boss, sir, but ef you mebbe mought—"

"Saul Sunday!" sharply cried the Decorator.

"Yes, sir, boss, your Honor!" with a violent start that sent his remaining posters fluttering over the sanded floor.

"Fall back, Sunday. You annoy the gentlemen. Stick to your corner and keep out of mischief. Sabe, Sunday?"

With a heavy sigh the symphony in black and gold shuffled over to where his staff leaned against the wall, propping his bowed figure in the angle formed by the meeting walls, slipping down that silver band and spreading his velvet table. Producing his shells and the little joker, Solemn Saul began his penance with the air of one for whom this world has long since lost all its charms.

Aubrey Conyers frowned as he noted the gambling device, but before he could interpose by word or action, Dandy Dutch gently touched his sleeve, smiling blandly as he spoke:

"Not in opposition, partner, but simply to keep the rascal from intruding on gentlemen. Still, if you seriously object—"

"Why should I? If a man is willing to spend his cash on a dead sure thing, I have no right to check him. There's room for all, and—"

"And suckers without number!" laughed Dandy Dutch, but snapping his fingers sharply as a signal to Solemn Saul, who closed his device with an alacrity that caused even Conyers to smile. "One of whom I'm eager to prove which, my dear sir, provided your dealers can get the better of my system. Sunday!"

"Yes sir, boss, your Honor!" quoth the automaton, striding forward.

"What do I drink when I'm dry, Sunday?"

"Whisky straight, your Honor."

"Ah, yes, so I do! Tell the barkeep' to set 'em up, Sunday. Join us, gentlemen?" languidly drawled the flashy sport, turning to the bar.

Aubrey Conyers drank with the others, but his keen eyes were making a close study of this queer sport, trying to place him where he belonged, but making poor success of the effort. What could be his real object? For, surely, this was not nature?

Dandy Dutch gave no sign if he noticed this scrutiny, but daintily sipped his liquor while Saul Sunday was paying the score. This done, the sport from the upper country turned toward the curtains and motioned his valet to open a passage for him.

Sunday obeyed, and followed at the heels of his master.

Though the night was still young, the various tables in the spacious apartment were fairly well patronized, one in particular. And as by instinct the dark eyes of the Decorator settled upon this, or rather upon the figure of the presiding genius.

This could be no other than the La Masque of whom Under-shot Dan Frick had spoken that same afternoon.

As well as could be judged while sitting, the woman was of rather more than the average height of her sex, with a full, admirably developed form as displayed by her rich suit of black velvet and snowy waist.

Yet nothing could be more decorous than this same garb, despite her questionable position as dealer of faro for rough sports in a common gambling hall.

The sleeve reached nearly to her wrists, ending in soft lace, and rose to her throat, permitting but a slight glimpse of snowy skin, for a lace edging fell from the closely-fitting mask even below her chin.

Her hands were gloved, though the finger-tips were removed to permit the requisite nicety of touch in dealing. In fine, not a single precaution had been omitted if she was really desirous of concealing her identity.

All these details Dandy Dutch took in at a single glance, then noiselessly drew near the table, closely watching the motions of the dealer as her fingers slowly slipped the cards from the silver case, moving with the regularity of an admirable machine, delaying only long enough for her patrons to place or shift their stakes, or to pay winnings and take down their losses.

There was no other official at the table, but La Masque evidently required no assistance. Through all she evinced a perfect knowledge of her double duties, and there were no remonstrances, no fault-finding, at least while Dandy Dutch stood making notes.

That was only until the end of the deal, for he had not visited the Oasis simply to see the sights.

"Sunday!"

"Yes, sir, boss, your Honor!" came the gloomy response.

La Masque swiftly lifted her eyes at the sound of that clear, musical voice, and—did she start when they met those magnetic black orbs?

If so, only Dandy Dutch himself had time to note the fact before the woman sport was once more clearing the painted lay-out in readiness for a fresh deal.

"Beg, buy, borrow or steal me a seat, Sunday," drawled the Decorator from Dead-lift. "I really believe I'll play a turn or two!"

"Have mine for a case, boss!" eagerly cried one of the players, who had just seen his final stake drawn to the other side of the board.

Andre Deutsch nodded slightly to his valet, who sighed heavily as he paid the speculating gambler his price, then bent his gaunt figure low enough to use his coat-tails as a duster before holding the vacant chair for his master's occupancy.

"Any limit, ma'am?" sweetly murmured the flashy sport, bending over the table with a fascinating smile; but if he hoped to win a word from those masked lips, he was doomed to disappointment.

In perfect silence La Masque pushed a printed card across the table, then began shuffling her cards preparatory to opening a new deal.

"Thanks!" bowed Deutsch, scanning the card through his glasses for an instant. "Better than nothing, but— Sunday, you rascal!"

"Right here, boss, your Honor!" came the doleful response.

"Unload, Sunday. And—see if you're mascot or hoodoo, to-night."

La Masque slipped the cards into the box, then sat waiting.

CHAPTER X.

DANDY DUTCH ASKS FOR A CLEAR FIELD.

WITH a sigh so heavy as to draw more eyes than one pair from the face of his master to himself, Solemn Saul lugged a fat notebook from his bosom, unstrapped it and slowly extracted therefrom a single bill.

"Lively, Sunday!" frowned his master as the valet hesitated. "The lady is waiting."

Crumpling the bill in his hand, Saul dropped it at random on the painted cloth. Bouncing from where it struck, the little wad settled down squarely on the queen.

"Fair woman forever!" murmured Dandy with mild enthusiasm as he noted the result. "The queen goes!"

La Masque flashed a glance into that handsome face as a reminder that gentlemen play and permit their money to do the talking, but as none of the other gamblers made an objection, Dandy Dutch received no further reproof just then.

Waiting only long enough to permit each man to bet that wished to venture at such an early stage, La Masque began to deal.

For several turns no bet was decided, but then the first queen came out in favor of the bank, and the dealer quietly brushed the wadded bill into the little drawer before her.

Solemn Saul uttered a muffled groan and shrunk back from the seat occupied by his master, who turned his head with a slight frown, saying:

"Sunday, you're off—'way off! You're a hoodoo, you rascal!"

"Yes, sir, boss, your Honor!" dolefully whined the symphony in yellow and black. "I knowed it soon's that female—"

"Make your game, gentlemen," coldly uttered La Masque, flashing a glance toward the master and man. "This is faro, not a side-show!"

"You hear, Sunday?" gravely nodded the Decorator. "The lady says you're wagging your chin too freely. Give me the boodle, and then take yourself to a nunnery, or some other seaport!"

The valet obeyed so far as passing the pocket-book to his master, though parting with the money dragged a sigh clear from the bottom of his interior. And yet, once that bond was fairly broken, the man of misery seemed in haste to beat the suggested retreat.

"Ef I only dared fer to make it a clean break-off ferever an' ever amen!" came dimly back to the listening ears as the gold and jet combination shuffled away. "Ef I only did! Ef I—Glory Ann—"

Possibly because this initial loss woke his lethargic soul, or it may have been because he had forced that masked mystery to use her voice, Dandy Dutch squared himself at the board like one who means business, pure and simple.

His face was blank as the mask opposite, but his dark eyes glowed with the feverish light so seldom seen save in the confirmed gambler.

He smoothed out a pile of bank-notes on the edge of the table, one hand covering them while the other placed his stake; the full limit, as all near could see at a glance.

Just in time, as the fates decided, for the very first card slipped after his bet was placed brought him a winner.

Dandy Dutch removed the winning sum, shifting his stake to another card, closely watching the movements of the dealer.

These seemed perfectly regular, and if there was anything crooked about the game, his keen wits had as yet failed to detect as much.

Again fortune smiled upon him, and once more Dandy Dutch changed his bet, by dropping a copper on it, as it remained upon the same card.

A slight frown darkened his handsome countenance, several turns later, for the card won

for the second time, his "coppering" the bet turning it into the bank instead.

Twice more he won and lost on that deal, then caught another winner when the pack was nearly exhausted.

La Masque paused when "last turn" was reached, but Dandy Dutch sat motionless, and no other player seemed to care about "catching the turn" on that deal.

Through another deal fortune alternately smiled and frowned on the sport from the upper country, the end leaving him a fair winner; but this slow progress apparently was not sufficient to satisfy his wants. Until La Masque emptied the box and began to shuffle the deck, Dandy Dutch held his impatience in check, so far respecting the unwritten rules of the game. But then he broke out with a tone remarkably impatient for one of his usually careless, happy-go-lucky disposition.

"This reminds me of the nag that could trot all day under the shade of an umbrella," he declared, pushing his seat back and flashing a look of discontent along the table. "I've also heard of a fellow trying to get fat by eating shadow soup with a knitting-needle, but I never came so near believing in its truth as right now!"

"Anything troubling you, Mr. Deutsch?" asked a cold, even tone from close at his elbow, a hand gently falling upon his shoulder, and a pair of steel-blue eyes meeting his dark orbs as he sharply turned his head. "If you have any fault to find, please step to one side with me. You are too much the gentleman to think of disturbing others while playing, I am sure."

There was a slight stir among the gamblers thus alluded to, for past experience told them that Aubrey Conyers was never more dangerous than when in his "silky mood."

"Only that rascally valet of mine, pardner," smiled the Decorator in response. "He's put a hoodoo on my game, when I brought him as a mascot. If you'd kindly ask some one to kick him out—kick him good and solid! I'll pay the price, and add my thanks in the bargain."

Despite himself, Conyers could not help smiling at this whimsical request, and he turned aside to visit the other tables, simply making a brief sign to the gleaming eyes of La Masque.

Dandy Dutch turned once more to the table, growing more cheerful as he won several small wagers in succession. Either his luck had shifted, or he was placing his bets with clearer judgment, for when the deal came to an end he was a heavy winner.

"It's rough on Sunday, but that's what I pay him for!" the sport laughed softly, as he deftly noted his winnings, and watched those white-tipped hands swiftly shuffling the cards for another turn. "A dollar to the man who reminds me that I owe some kind friend the price of a kicking!"

Luck still clung to the banner of our friend from Dead-lift, but while he was the object of almost general envy among those who had been far less lucky, a cloud gradually settled over his handsome face.

"Oh, for the good old times when no sport recognized the combination of the letters which make up the term limit!" he said, dropping in his chair, more like a loser than one who had already won sufficient to keep a man for months in idleness. "If— Happy thought!" he cried, rising from his seat, turning it upside down to hold his place, while he hurried off to where towered the athletic figure of Aubrey Conyers.

"I say, Conyers!"

"Well, sir, what is the matter now?" frowned the proprietor.

"I'm growing tired of making two bites at a cherry! I came here to-night to make or break, to quit a lion or a bob-tailed mouse, fresh from a bath in the wash-bowl! But I'll die of old age before I can begin to do either, unless—I say, dear fellow!" coaxingly, softly patting the rigid gambler on an arm, as he added: "What's the matter with me buying those other duffers off for an hour or two?"

"They are my patrons, sir, and as such have all the rights in common with yourself—and even more, so long as you see fit to kick up such a racket, sir!" frowned Conyers, seemingly in a far more impatient mood than usual that night.

Dandy Dutch seemed a little taken aback by this curt speech, and his white fingers tangled themselves in his curly beard. Conyers turned his left side toward the sport, thus insuring the free use of his fighting hand in case of need; but apparently the Decorator was not in a quarrelsome mood, so far as fighting went, though he seemed irritable enough on other points.

"Then—surely you might lift the limit so far as I'm concerned, dear fellow?"

"If that is all you want, let it go that way," curtly said Conyers, as he moved toward the table, where La Masque was once more dealing the cards for such players as remained in their seats.

The proprietor made a sign which drew a cold bow from the woman on the further side of the table, and with a sigh of relief Dandy Dutch resumed his seat, showing his sincerity

by placing an unusually heavy stake on the king.

Almost immediately his card turned up a winner, and twice more before the last turn was made he repeated the act.

Fortune fluctuated during the earlier part of the next deal, but still smiled on the Decorator oftener than she frowned, and like one who has long since learned the wisdom of "crowding a good thing," the up-country sport pressed his luck with vigor and matchless nerve.

"It's rough on you, pardner," he laughed, softly, turning his head to glance lazily into the grave yet expressionless countenance of Aubrey Conyers who stood at his elbow. "But when I play I like to make the fur fly—my own or the other, with the tiger's for choice!"

"All winning and no losses would mighty soon freeze out the banks, you know," quietly retorted the proprietor, turning away as though tired of idleness.

Despite his heavy gains, Dandy Dutch fidgeted uneasily in his seat as the game progressed. One by one the other players had dropped out until only two or three were left to play, and these, noting the almost steady success of this new sport, modestly followed his lead, naturally desirous of gaining a few crumbs from his over-laden feast.

Now there is nothing more distasteful to the true gambler than this course of procedure, unless it be a steady betting against the cards he picks out to win, and therefore Dandy Dutch had some excuse for frowning.

More than once he purposely placed a bet, against the winning of which the odds were extreme, and once he grimly chuckled as he saw his jackals share his losses. But, then, as a deal came to an end, he broke out once more with:

"My fellow has levanted. I never was much of a pack-mule, and anything like a load makes me tired, just to think of it! So—gentlemen, all!" turning toward the remaining players, a bland smile lighting up his oriental features as he softly uttered: "How much may each and all of you deem your time worth?"

Those addressed stared in doubt, some shrinking, others beginning to swell out blusteringly, but before any harsh words could be shaped, the Decorator briskly added in business-like tones:

"You ought to see just how the cat jumps, gentlemen. I hate to hire a burro to pack my winnings home, and I won't do it unless fortune positively insists on turning me into a muleteer. Still if I have to do it, the sooner it is over the better for everybody concerned. I'll have the boodle and you'll have my room—see?"

"You are not crowding us in the least," laughed one of the men, who had most persistently followed the lead of the unknown sport.

"If I were I'd let you do the kicking," smiled Deutsch. "As it is, you are crowding me, as any sport could tell with half an eye. But I'm one of the most reasonable fellows you ever ran up against, and I'm more than willing to pay for what I might claim as a natural right."

"Now, how much will you take to draw off a bit, giving me a clear field and no favor? Name your figures, gentlemen, and I'll not keep you idle one moment longer than I can help. With the limit lifted, making or breaking is mighty sharp work, you know!"

"And if I should decline to deal for you alone, sir?" coldly asked La Masque, her dark eyes glowing through her velvet mask.

CHAPTER XI.

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.

THAT same evening found Dudley Mann a caller at the house of his uncle, though it was without any particular desire on his part for an interview with that gentleman.

Rightly or wrongfully, the bank clerk felt that Leonard Corwin had treated him unjustly that afternoon, giving him harsh suspicion instead of justly deserved praise.

"Another count for that rascal to settle!" he mentally declared, with eyes that flashed and sparkled wondrously bright for a man who wore glasses as a rule.

By which was meant Major Holly Gardenhire, of course. In his hardest moments Dudley Mann would hardly dare stigmatize his uncle thus.

And yet, more than once, the young man had complained bitterly of that relative's hard, grasping, Shylock nature, leading his intimates to infer that, had strict justice been done, he would be something more than a mere clerk. While making no positive charges, Dudley said enough to make many believe that Leonard Corwin had not acted liberally, to put it in its mildest shape, with his sister when death called her from her only child.

It was not often that the young man took up this strain, and never since cousinly liking had deepened into love, but it might easily be that something of his thoughts, real or fancied, had come to the ears of Prospect banker. Whether or no, his manner had certainly grown bolder and less kind of late days, and the hot, impatient spirit of his nephew strongly rebelled.

Leonard Corwin did not return to the bank that afternoon, and though Dudley Mann kept fancying the worst on his fair cousin's account,

he stuck to his duties until they were fully performed.

All that remained to indicate the exciting scene of the day was the stoutly boarded window.

The last act performed before closing the bank for the night was writing a brief little note to his cousin, and this Dudley slipped into the hand of the woman who answered his ring at his uncle's house.

"Give it to Miss Lida, Jane, and tell her I called in person," he whispered, after being assured that the young lady appeared to be in her usual state of health.

Dudley did not enter the house, for he had simply passed that way while on his way to supper, at the Occidental Hotel. Just then he had no wish to meet Leonard Corwin.

"It's odds I'd blurt out enough to catch the sack!" he muttered below his breath while rapidly striding down the street. "And that—unless I could coax Lida to go with me!"

The hour was still early when Dudley again rung the bell at the Corwin residence, to be admitted by Lida herself, still pale and looking far from natural, yet so lovely that her cousin caught her in his arms and pressed her tightly to his breast.

"Don't—please, cousin!" Lida managed to utter, averting her face and cheating him of the kiss he tried to rifle.

"Uncle Len isn't in? I thought he'd be off to Lodge!"

"He has gone, but he promised to be home early."

Dudley looked as though he felt defrauded, but Lida was already moving toward the parlor, and he could only follow after.

It was hardly an auspicious opening, to his mind, and even when the door closed behind them, he made no more "cousinly" overtures. That other kiss was rankling in his mind, and for the time being Mann felt more like quarreling than love-making, even with such an attractive partner.

"Jane gave you my note, of course?" he said, after a brief silence which must have proved quite as painful to the maiden as to himself, for she simply bowed, unwilling to trust her tongue even to utter so few words as this query required.

The young man shifted uneasily in his chair, his face flushing, to grow pale again. Lida sat with downcast eyes, no less ill at ease. Each felt that a crisis was at hand, but neither knew precisely how to open the subject which was, naturally, uppermost in their minds.

"You are not—not expecting company this evening, Lida?" at length ventured Mann.

"I have no engagement, cousin," was her low response.

"I didn't know but what you found me in the way, and—"

"Dudley!"

"Is it so mighty strange, then?" with his eyes glittering through their glasses, his face flushing with rising temper. "How many evenings have I found you alone during the past half-month? Can you remember one night on which that in—that fellow who calls himself Major Gardenhire, hasn't been here?"

"He calls to see father, cousin," her tones lower than ever, her lip quivering, sharp pain revealed in her pale face.

"And that father—Bah!" flinging back his head impatiently, his nostrils quivering as he flung out one hand in anger. "Lida, what is there between you and that fellow?"

"Do you mean Major Gardenhire, cousin?"

"I mean the man who dared to kiss you in public on the street this day, Miss Corwin!" flashed the now thoroughly jealous clerk, rising from his chair and striding rapidly to and fro.

It was a brutal speech, and in calmer moments no one would be quicker to recognize as much, but just then Dudley Mann was hardly accountable for his words or actions.

Cursed with a more than ordinary fiery temper, the events of that day had driven him half-mad. And though he knew well his own weakness in that direction, Dudley had drunk more than one glass of liquor while waiting for the hour at which he had asked permission to call on his fair cousin.

All this combined seemed to fill his brain with fire, and for the time being he had very slight control of his tongue.

He stopped short before Lida as he uttered those words, but she made no reply. Her head was bowed upon her hands, and he knew she was weeping from the motions of her lithe figure.

It was hard to resist the impulse to drop on his knees before her, to take her hands in his, to lift her sweet face and kiss therefrom those bitter tears; so hard that he mechanically thrust his hands behind his back.

"Whether he had the right to kiss you or not, Lida, it was the act of a cur, not of a man," he added, his tones all the harsher from the battle he was waging with his love. "I ought to have killed him—I wish now that I had!"

Still no response. Only the sobs grew more severe, the head bowing still lower.

"I saw you just before—it happened," choking over the term and substituting another. "I recognized him first, and that helped me to

guess his companion—shall I tell you why, Lida Corwin?"

"Don't—you are cruel, Dudley," the poor girl managed to utter.

"It's the truth that stings sharpest, always," with a short, harsh laugh. "And yet—Lida, look at me, please."

She made the effort, but it was a failure. Tears dimmed her sight, and again her fair face was buried in her trembling hands.

With forced composure Dudley Mann drew a chair closer to her seat and dropped into it. He touched her hands, but as they did not immediately yield, he desisted, drawing back and coldly saying:

"If I had been the only witness, Lida, it would not be so terrible, for even a cold-blooded rascal like that might make amends as far—"

The maiden lifted her head, her eyes glowing with a sudden indignation, more at his tones than the words he had chosen, harsh though they were.

"You have no right to speak to me like this, Mr. Mann! Of what crime dare you accuse me? You, whom I tried to—to—"

The words failed her, but she no longer hid her face. And in her eyes there shone a sad, yet brave reproach that fairly bewildered him.

"I have the right in so far that you are my cousin, Lida," he managed to utter, growing bitter as he proceeded. "I have the right to punish a cowardly cur who dared insult that cousin as few women ever were insulted. And, as Heaven hears me this night!" his trembling hand uplifting and clinching tight, "I'll call Major Gardenhire to a stern account before he's a day older!"

"No, no, you must not! Promise me that you will let the matter drop right where it is, dear Dudley," impetuously cried Lida, recalling with a shiver those dark hints let drop by the person in question.

Unfortunately Mann could not know this, and jealousy led him to believe her fears were awakened solely on his rival's account. The bitter thought served to calm him in a degree, though it only deepened the deadly resolve he had taken.

"What do you know of this fellow, anyhow, Lida?" he asked, coldly. "Who is he? What is he? Where did he come from? For all any honest person can say, he may be the blackest rascal unhung! He is a gambler, to my certain knowledge. He may be a thief, a forger, even this mysterious Captain Vampire, for that matter!"

"Whatever he is, I hate him even more than I fear the man!" impetuously cried the maiden, flushing hotly as she recalled the dastard deed of which he had been guilty that afternoon.

"Lida!" gasped the clerk, thrilling to his very center. "You—you are not in love with him? You—say again that you hate him!"

"I do say it again," steadily meeting his ardent gaze. "Why should I not, when it is the truth? Why should I not say it after—oh, Dudley!" her courage suddenly deserting her, and sobs again breaking her voice. "I would rather have died than—than have you see him—"

The sentence was left incomplete, for with a glad cry that almost choked him, Dudley Mann clasped her to his breast, fairly reeling under that precious burden, his emotions were so deliriously sweet.

The scales had dropped from his eyes at last. He knew now, what only his unreasoning jealousy had kept unseen for so many painful days, that his cousin loved him, even as he loved her.

And yet, even when his joy was the greatest, the evil vision of Holly Gardenhire would persist in intruding itself. If that vile outrage had never occurred!

Nor was Lida Corwin perfectly happy, though she made no resistance when his hot lips almost smothered her with kisses. Though she had for nearly a year shyly looked forward to the avowal with strange delight—a delight that awed while it intoxicated her—now that it had come, in actions rather than words, she trembled with fear and dread for the future, rather than with unalloyed bliss.

She could not forget the seemingly damning proofs which Major Holly Gardenhire had produced. She could not forget that he had hinted her cousin's honor, if not his liberty, lay wholly in his hands.

She longed to tell Dudley all, that he might arm himself against this unscrupulous rival, but she dared not. She dreaded lest her worst fears should be confirmed by word or blush.

"Am I in a dream, Lida?" at length asked Dudley, drawing back to gaze into her face as it rested against his heaving breast. "You love me, not that scoundrel?"

"I love you, Dudley," was the brave response, her eyes meeting his, and for the first time daring to let him see the depth and power of her love. "I love you, and you alone!"

After such a precious confession, Dudley could not be expected to say much, for a time, but his actions surely ought to have amply repaid the maiden for her sacrifice. Just how long that rapture might have lasted, there are no means of deciding, for shortly after there came the sound of an opening door and footsteps drawing near the room.

CHAPTER XII.

A WELL-MEANT LECTURE.

"It is father!" softly exclaimed the maiden, slipping from the embrace of her cousinly lover and taking a seat quite remote from the one in to which that startled young man dropped.

This was scarcely accomplished before the door opened and the portly figure of Leonard Corwin paused on the threshold, his keen gaze roving swiftly from maiden to man, his thin lips closing even more firmly than ordinary.

"Evening, Dudley," he crisply uttered, with a slight nod. "Left all in good shape at the bank, of course?"

"As usual, uncle," bowed the clerk, flushing under that steady gaze. "I had the window boarded up firmly, and I'll sleep with one eye open to-night. It was too late to do more."

"That was enough. I'm glad you called, for there's a bit of business I wanted to talk over with you."

Without waiting for an answer, Leonard Corwin turned and passed on, leaving Dudley Mann feeling anything but happy. More than ever did he realize that his employer was a hard, cold, stern man. Would what had happened that evening soften him any?

Lida seemed to read his thoughts, for she glided over to his side and gracefully dropped to her knees with one hand touching his, the other resting tenderly on his shoulder as he bowed over her.

"Just one, dear!" she murmured, then added hurriedly: "Father will be back immediately, and before he comes—will you grant my first wish, dear?"

"To the extent of my life, darling!" was his impetuous response.

"Then—pray don't tell him to-night," faltered Lida, her eyes drooping and a charming blush suffusing her cheeks. "I fear—he may not be in a good humor, and—"

"If you ask it, little woman," breathed Dudley, secretly delighted to obey, but managing to leave the impression of a favor conferred rather than one received.

Lida thanked him in the best way a maiden can thank her lover, then avoided his attempted retaliation, slipping out of reach, touching her lips with a finger-tip as she crossed the threshold.

Scarcely had her graceful figure vanished from his sight, than, sad to relate, the old demon of jealousy again took possession of the lover, who should have been in the seventh heaven of delight.

Was she so eager to postpone the announcement solely because she feared a rejection of his suit, or was it—

"Curse that little bound!" he grated, savagely, his hands clinching tightly, his eyes glowing vividly through his glasses at the thought. "I'll never rest easy until I've broken his infernal neck!"

He could remember now that Lida had never cleared away the mystery preceding that public salute. Why had she been walking arm in arm with that puny scoundrel? Impudent though he might be, would he have dared venture so far without at least the shadow of encouragement?

Strange doubts for a lover just accepted, but true for all that. It was the weakest yet the strongest trait of his character, this inordinate jealousy.

Dudley Mann looked gloomy enough when Leonard Corwin returned to the room where his clerk was waiting, and though the banker seemed relieved by the sight of his frowns, the absence of his daughter seemed to strengthen the suspicion which had found birth in his brain when he first paused on the threshold.

"I have kept you waiting a little longer than I anticipated, Dudley," he gravely said, as he drew a chair near the center-table.

"Not at all—never mention it, sir!" was the brisk reply, as the young man drew himself erect, looking all attention. "You wished to see me on a point of business, I believe, uncle?"

"It may be called business, though it has nothing particularly concerning the bank or your clerical duties," slowly said the other, resting an elbow on the table and shading his eyes from the light.

Dudley Mann stirred a little uneasily at this, for he felt that this was more to cover that keen, searching gaze than to protect his eyes. And this suspicion carried him into that lecture with a handicap.

"Of course I'm ready to listen to whatever you may care to say, Uncle Leonard. I have no secrets from you, sir."

"Are you quite sure of that, nephew?"

The question was more than grave; it was even anxious. But Dudley only felt the sting of suspicion, and chafed at it.

"Will you kindly speak out plainly, sir?" he asked, his voice held under fair control, though his face flushed and his eyes began to glow.

"Have you heard anything to my discredit? If so, it's no more than fair you should give me a chance to explain before you condemn."

"Steady, nephew!" with a grim nod. "I have accused you of nothing as yet. I am not sure there is anything to accuse you of. I sin-

cerely hope not. Yet—as you request it, I will use plain language.

"How many times in the last month have you visited the Oasis?"

"Not once—in business hours," the young man replied, with just a touch of impudence which, despite his gravity, brought the ghost of a smile into the face of the banker.

"And how many times after business hours, if I may ask?" persisted Corwin.

"Several times: possibly half a dozen all told. Not nearly so often as any one of a score other young men whose names I might mention, however."

"They are not relatives of mine, nor do they serve as clerk in my bank," still more gravely.

"Is it so deadly a sin, then?"

"It is an error, to say the least, and one into which I am very sorry to hear you have fallen, Dudley."

"May I ask to whom you owe your information, sir?"

"There is no need to mention names, since you admit the fact, nephew. I could give you my authority if—"

"Might it be Major Holly Gardenhire? I have seen him at the Oasis every time I dropped in there, at least ever since he made his first appearance in Prospect," deliberately uttered the young man, his face showing more defiance than was exactly respectful.

"I have said there is no necessity for mentioning names," steadily said the banker, dropping his hand and letting the light fall fairly across his face. "You seem to resent my asking you this question, Dudley. Why should you, if you are not ashamed of the action?"

"Because no one likes to think his movements are being spied upon, I presume, sir," in lower tones, his eyes dropping before that keen, yet not all unkindly gaze.

"If that person never strayed from the right path, there would be nothing for spies to feed upon, nephew. Wait," lifting a hand to check the young man. "Do not speak without weighing your words, Dudley. Your fiery temper is your worst enemy. Curb it, unless you wish to have all your hopes dashed to the earth, ruined beyond restoration."

"Though my nature is reserved, though a long life of trying business has led me to keep my more kindly feelings under cover, I have loved you almost as my own son, Dudley, and never more tenderly than when I felt in duty bound to reprove you for wild or thoughtless actions."

"You may not find this easy to believe, I know that you have been led to regard me as, to a certain degree, harsh, even unjust to you. You have even charged me with holding back what ought by rights to have come to you at the death of your mother, my sister."

"I have only repeated what mother herself told me, before she died, Mr. Corwin. Don't charge her with lying!"

"She was my sister, and I loved her, even as I have since loved the son she left behind her," was the steady response. "As heaven hears my voice now, she was mistaken. As God is my judge, I never wronged her or her son out of a penny."

"I say this much, but I will not press you to believe it, Dudley," his tones once more gravely cold. "Some day I hope you will know me better. Until then I can wait."

"But what I started to say is this: You occupy a responsible position, and such being the case, it is only natural that your movements should be more closely noted than those of other young men. Even you ought to be able to realize so much, nephew?"

"I have never made a crooked track, though I may have taken my little fling, at odd times, sir."

"Too often for your own good, I fear," with a half sigh that was instantly covered by the stern old gentleman. "You have gambled, not only at the Oasis, but at even less reputable resorts, if that be possible. You have drank to excess—"

"That I deny, Mr. Corwin!" with sharp anger. "Name the villain who dares calumniate me thus, and I'll drag him here to own his vile lies!"

"If you deny it, that is sufficient, Dudley. I have not learned to distrust you to the extent of refusing to believe your truth. When I do—but we needn't enter upon that point just now."

"I thank you for so much, at least, uncle," his tones subdued, his eyes drooping. "Still, I think it is best for me to bid you good-night and go away. You called my temper my worst enemy. I begin to think as much myself. May I go?"

"Wait yet a little longer, Dudley," with unabated gravity. "Since we have spoken so frankly, better finish up now, rather than have another unpleasant scene."

Though with evident reluctance Dudley Mann resumed his seat.

"If you had been any other person, and had I loved you less, Dudley, I would have discharged you from the bank the instant I learned for certain you were frequenting gambling dens. As it is, I am willing to give you another chance."

"I am growing old, but I have not yet for-

gotten what it was to be young. And my eyes are still keen enough to see what takes place about me. I saw something this very evening, Dudley, which would, at one time, have filled my old heart with joy. Now—whether what I saw ever comes to a climax, depends mainly on yourself."

"You mean—"

"Never mind what I mean, since you can hardly help guessing the truth," with a quick gesture that cut the young man short. "We are neither of us in fit condition for entering upon that subject more clearly. And—unless you alter your recent mode of living, sir, we will never go further into it!"

It was all his old imperious self, and the young man visibly cowed before it. His face grew paler, his hands clinched, his breath came in short, quick pants, but he made no reply in words.

"I called you to this talk, Dudley Mann, to make you fully comprehend this. I resolved to speak plainly, and to tell you that I mean to thoroughly investigate your actions for the past few weeks. I have heard, falsely I try to believe, that you have lost very large sums over the faro-tables: sums far too large for a young man on a salary to even hope to clear off without aid of friends or—worse!"

Dudley Mann sprung to his feet, pale as a ghost, his eyes fairly glowing with powerful emotions. And when he spoke his tones were harsh and unnatural:

"You said well, Mr. Corwin! You have spoken plainly—too plainly for me to quietly sit and hearken to, blood relative though you may be. If to-morrow was not the Sabbath, I would resign my situation right now; as it is, I will wait only long enough for you to look over my books and admit that they are in perfect order."

Leonard Corwin tried to check him, but Dudley Mann was far too angry for that, and he hastily left the house.

CHAPTER XIII.

SOLENN SAUL ON HIS OWN HOOK.

LIKE one literally bowed down by a mountain of care, grief and wretchedness, Saul Sunday moved away from the table at which La Masque sat dealing faro, and had Dandy Dutch deigned to cast a glance after his "big sunflower," he surely would have thought him quite heart-broken by those languidly impatient words.

But a change came over the valet as soon as he had passed through the heavy curtains dividing the two apartments. His tall figure stood more nearly erect than usual, and his melancholy looks changed to an almost ludicrous defiance as he shook his clinched fist in the direction of his employer.

"Hoodoo, he! Hoodoo goes, ef I kin fetch it! Cross your luck, top an' bottom, rights an' lefts, with a big round ring to swallow it all, an' never no eend to it—so!"

Solemn Saul spat on the floor, sweeping the toe of one foot through the mark in keeping with his grimly muttered words, ending with a circular flourish that completed the malicious spell.

His cheeks swelling, his head flung back, his little gray eyes glittering and snapping, the valet glanced around the saloon to find himself and his curious actions the center of attraction, just then.

"Evenin' to ye, gents, one an' all," he said, stiffly nodding his head in salutation, then returning to his attitude of defiance. "They's times to grin an' bear it, an' then ag'in they's times fer kickin' like a bay steer with a bum-bee nest stuck to each hind leg. An' this is one o' them emargencies. An' I'm doin' the kickin'."

"Mighty right, too, I reckon, pardner," ventured one of the company, with a covert wink toward a mate. "Bin turribly 'posed onto, ain't ye?"

"More then anybody as is a body hes any right fer to bear an' still stay a body," replied Saul, heaving a monstrous sigh and shaking his head with a return of his usual melancholy. "Ef it was time afore the war over ag'in. Ef it was 'way down South in Dixie. Ef my hide was as black outside as some souls be inside. Ef a contract with a man is wuss then a barg'in with the devil. Then—"

"Look at me, gents!" stretching out his long arms and slowly turning around on his heels to give them all a complete view of his gorgeously attired person. "Take it all in, ef the tryin' don't make ye color blind fer a month to come. Try to 'magine them gyarmints was stuck onto your own selves, thar to hang an' stick an' remain day in an' day out till time no end! An' then, ef they's 'nough left o' ye to do it, say ef you kin blame a pore critter fer kickin' when he gits the chaine!"

More the action and looks of the speaker than his words caused that general burst of laughter. It was all so ridiculous, and yet it seemed so genuine. What would have been utter extravagance far away toward the rising sun, was taken for granted in Prospect.

Solemn Saul gazed reproachfully at his boisterous audience, and for a brief space it almost seemed as though he meant to take it as a per-

sonal affront; but then his usual meek forbearance prevailed, and he sighed heavily as he cast a glance toward the bar, one hand slipping into his pocket as a natural sequence.

To emerge with double alacrity, catching the polished staff and setting its mate at liberty to explore another pocket, while his gaunt visage reflected hope and doubt in bewildering changes.

"Look at it, gents," the man of many woes uttered, holding up a "short bit" between thumb and forefinger. "Thar's the 'stent o' my fortune, an' me jest onto the p'int o' shoutin' fer the crowd with the house throwed in! Kicked out by the boss, an' this all I've got fer to buy salve fer to putt on— Good Lawd!" with a groan of intense disgust, his gaunt figure bowing until only the stout staff kept him from entirely collapsing.

"Your boss is good for what you want, I reckon," suggested one of the company nearest the sorely afflicted fellow, but the mere idea was enough to spur Saul Sunday into action.

"They ain't no boss any more!" he declared, straightening up and frowning darkly. "Them ties is clean bu'sted wide open. Fer why? Jest beca'se I couldn't fetch him winnin' luck every whack! Is this the way to rig out a luck-stone? Kin you 'spect a mascot when you turn him into a 'Talian monkey?"

"Not ef you ferget to fasten the tail on, surely!" laughed the facetious prospector.

Solemn Saul strode up to the bar and laid down his dime.

"Tain't much, when ye gaze onto it one way, pardner, sir, but it's a mighty heap when ye come to think an' say thar's the last chunk out of a dollar that stan's atwixt me an' starvation fer drink. Look onto it, boss. Try to putt yourself into these yer' clothes o' mine. An' then sling out the biggest glass ye kin perwide fer that wealth!"

"That's all right: help yourself," nodded the barkeeper, producing decanter and glass, sweeping the despised "short bit" into the till.

Sunday obeyed, slowly tipping the decanter and watching the trickling stream as it fell, sighing as if unconsciously.

"When shell we three meet ag'in? How long 'll it be afore I kin drive 'nother nail? An'—luck to ye, gents!" lifting the glass and smacking his lips in anticipation. "Better luck then I ever knowed ever sence—an' all fer a critter that lugged a name like Preserved Polycarp Piety! Good Lawd!"

He emptied the glass at a gulp, like one who fears to trust his stomach longer, using a sleeve for lack of a handkerchief, his little gray eyes turned half angrily, half reproachfully toward one of the small posters which he had pinned to the wall earlier in the evening.

"You see how turrible low down I be jest now, gents," with another sigh that apparently came from his very shoes. "But time was—an' not so mighty long ago, nuther! Time was when I could hold up the head o' me with the pick o' the herd. Time was when I could beller an' paw an' cock my fly-brush from one eend o' the San Saba to the other, an' never a snort would dare to come in answer. But that was afore I run me foul o' that female woman who let me coax her to become Glory Ann Sunday. That was afore she left me a letter to say that I was played, an' she'd sloped with a handsomer man—an' him named Preserved Polycarp Piety!"

"Jest one man?" asked the prospector.

"An' him not much higher then whar I stow my chuck," nodded Saul Sunday, mechanically patting that portion of his anatomy. "Ef Glory Ann ever gits mad at him an' wants fer to spank the pesky critter, she'll hev to borrow a spyglass afore findin' the right spot."

"You don't seem to greatly admire her judgment, friend!" laughed another of the company. "Yet you are hunting her, I believe?"

"An' you never see a mortal critter set out hotter onto a trail then I did when I come in from the round-up an' ketched onto that p'izen letter!" groaned the Sad Man from San Saba, dolefully wagging his head as he stared with glassy gaze at that poster. "Fer I didn't stop to think that what was his loss was my clear gain. It was bein' told that yer' little runt was a handsomer man, I reckon. Must 'a' bin, an' then— Gents, I can't go no fuder into it. I can't say no more then that I must 'a' bin locoed afore I let that sport—ketch me foul like he did."

"But that's over with now. He done kicked me out. He said I was a hoodoo. He told me to go hang, or words to that effect. An' I'm goin' the shortest way I know how to pick out. An' when I git to whar they won't be nobody in 'tickular fer to git shocked, I'm goin' to strip off these duds an' build a bonfire out of 'em. Yes, sir, gents, I jest am! An' ef I can't find leaves big enough to kiver the nakedness o' me, I'll hunt a hole an' crawl into it ontel I kin grow a suit o' wool!"

As he spoke thus, Saul Sunday thumped his staff against the floor, the gesture causing the band to loosen and the velvet table to fly open. He stared at this, one hand mechanically moving toward the pocket in which he carried his shells and the little joker, his eyes turning to—

ward the glittering array of glasses and decanters behind the bar.

"Nickels, dimes an' dollars!" he muttered, that wistful look deepening in his face as the temptation assailed him more strongly. "Ef I only could—an' why not?"

His head flew back, shaking those flaxen locks behind his ears. He cast his little eyes over the company half sheepishly, half brazenly.

"Gents, you all jest a bit ago see me bring up the last scrapin's from bed-rock. You see that I couldn't call the gang to water, fer they wasn't nothin' to pay the wharwith. An' you've looked on while the boss I've niggered fer these many a turrible long spell—you've wiped tears o' sympathy out o' the two eyes o' ye jest fer seein' a white man kicked out o' house an' home an' chuck an' moistness, 'long o' no fault o' his'n, nuther. An' now—"

"I do reckon I could die happy ef I hed jest one weenty bit bottle o' mountain dew fer to brace me up while starvin' to death in naked misery! An' so—who'll lay a bottle that he kin onkiver the little joker fu'st time o' tryin'?"

"Isn't that just a little one-sided, stranger?" laughed the prospector. "You're strapped, 'cordin' to your own say-so. Then how ef you lose the bet?"

"How kin I lose, an' me doin' the throwin'?" grinned the man with the shells, impudently.

"Then you mought as well ask the feller to give ye the whisky!" the miner growled, turning away with a scowl of disgust.

"Ef it warn't jest fer the looks of it. Ef it wasn't that gamblin' tuck the bitter edge off, an' made a gent feel that he hedn't fell so mighty low as to beg—*beg?* An' time was when I could—"

Solemn Saul seemed to choke over the bare memory, his head drooping, his face growing longer, his whole being the picture of hopeless misery and dejection.

Yet his long fingers kept the shells and the little joker moving nimbly, defying the eye to keep certain track of the little black pea.

Although it was difficult to think that this fellow was anything more than a cunning fraud, one of the gentlemen present presently said:

"The bottle goes, stranger, if only as a reward for your perfect acting. Hide your joker, and if I don't show him up, play I lose."

"Honest?" eagerly asked the man of woe. "An' you won't kick ef I do cheat the two eyes o' ye? Fer it's part o' the game, an' I couldn't play it square ef I tried double hard. I've got to cheat ye, boss!"

"If you can," laughed the other. "I've seen the game before, and flatter myself I know all about all of the tricks. Do your best, for if I catch on, you'll have to hunt up another sucker."

Solemn Saul squared himself, and set the shells to flying, over and under, right and left, so swiftly that they seemed moved by a magnet instead of his fingers alone.

His usual air of listless despondency had vanished, and if the stake had been his own life, he could not have worked more earnestly.

"All set, boss!" he finally said, with a sigh of anxiety, as the hand of the gentleman hung over the little table. "I'm cheatin' ye, sir, boss, your Honor. The little joker is thar, but you don't know the way to pick him out. Fer when they's so much—Didn't I tell ye so?"

He laughed grimly as the gentleman lifted a shell, to find the space below unoccupied. And he laughed again, as the man picked up both of the other shells with the same result.

"Where is the joker anyhow?" with a half-laugh, half-frown. "It isn't in your hands, for I made sure of that at first. It isn't—"

With a deft touch on the lower surface of the table, Solemn Saul caused the pea to pop up out of a cunningly-hidden pocket in the cloth.

"The bottle is yours. Give him his choice, barkeeper."

"An' now fer a hole in the dark whar I kin git b'iled owl drunk!"

CHAPTER XIV.

SOLEMN SAUL AS A LOVER.

SOLEMN SAUL closed his table and pocketed his shells as he uttered these words, turning toward the bar with his little gray eyes sparkling vividly.

The barkeeper handed forth a bright labeled flask, which was hidden with remarkable celerity in one of those black-bound pockets.

"Good-evenin', gents, all," he bowed, nervously edging away from the bar toward the outer door. "Looks mighty hoggish, I'm free to 'fess, but ef you'll stop long enough fer to 'sider the peculiar circumstances, mebber you'll be kind enough fer to overlook it jest this once."

"Time was—but now: only this weenty bottle atwixt me an' the cold, onpityin' world!"

With a sigh that almost degenerated into a snuffle, the Sad Man from San Saba bowed his head and shuffled out of the saloon, looking like one who had no further hope, no prospect save that of leaving the cruel world by the shortest possible route!

No one sought to follow him. Not a hand was lifted to stay his flight. Possibly because all present were more or less thoroughly acquainted with the cunning tricks by which professional bummers and dead-beats manage to secure a living!

If any person had taken the trouble to have followed the avowed suicide, and they had been cunning enough to escape his notice, their doubts would speedily have been decided by his actions.

Solemn Saul quickened his pace the instant he cleared the brightly illumined doorway, hurrying to the nearest corner around which he whipped, to turn and cautiously peer back, like one who expects an attempt at espionage.

If any such attempt had been made, it must have been detected by those keen eyes, thanks to the broad sheet of light coming through the open door and the high, wide windows on either side. But no such spy was to be seen, and with a long breath of relief, Solemn Saul hastened away, keeping in the deepest shadows where his too uncommon attire might run the less risk of attracting unwelcome attention.

Down one street and up another he hastened, never for a moment at a loss which course to select, betraying a remarkable knowledge of the town for one who had never been noticed in Prospect previous to the night before the present one.

Though still classed simply as a mining-town, Prospect was of considerable size and growing steadily in importance, containing some four thousand inhabitants, in addition to a considerable floating population.

It was fairly well laid out, and could boast of a number of nice buildings, though not to be compared with older and more populous towns in that respect. There was an air of "newness" about the place, and nothing like uniformity in the style of architecture, while as the center of business was left behind, the houses were scattered and irregularly planted.

The long legs of the man in livery quickly carried him into a quarter confined to dwellings, and at length he came to a halt not far from a modest story and a half frame building, standing by itself in a fair-sized inclosure. The yard was well stocked with shrubbery, and the sweet scent of roses in bloom came floating on the cool night air.

Crouching in the shade, Solemn Saul gazed keenly, searchingly around him in all directions, his actions those of one who meditated a burglary rather than one about to bid adieu to a world of sorrow.

So far as he could see, there were no persons about in that immediate vicinity, and when thoroughly convinced that his actions were not being spied upon, the man in livery stole silently into the yard, gaining a position not far from the house. Crouching down beside a fragrant rose bush, he put a hand to his lips and sounded a low, peculiar whistle, repeating the signal twice, then pausing as if for an answer.

It was not long delayed, though it did not come in kind. A tall, cloaked figure made its appearance, pausing when fairly clear of the house, as though uncertain which direction to take.

"Don't ye be skeered, ma'am, an' take to runnin' away ef ye see the figger of a man climbin' up out o' the dark, now!" gently warned Saul Sunday as he rose from his place of concealment.

"It is—is you?" faltered the cloaked figure, shrinking back as though alarmed.

"Cross my heart ef it ain't, honey—I mean ma'am!" earnestly declared Sunday, moderating his eager pace lest that flight become a fact. "Good Lawd!" heaving a mighty sigh as he clapped a hand over the region occupied by his heart. "Ef you loved—ef you felt as hard es I do, ma'am, you'd know me with the two pritty eyes o' ye clean shet up tight to never open!"

"I recognize you now, but," with coy hesitation in figure as in voice, "what must you think of me, sir? I never was guilty of so bold an action before, and—"

"Ef I only dared!" fervently murmured Sunday, as he drew nearer. "Ef I wasn't skeered it'd set you to trimblin' an' runnin' away with skeeriness at the heat o' my feelin's, ma'am! Only fer that, I wouldn't ax nothin' better then to tell you jest what an' jest how mighty much I think o' you! Good Lawd—yes, sir, ma'am!"

"I didn't mean—I meant how you must—how foolishly weak and silly you must think me, to consent to meet an almost stranger in this manner," murmured the woman, still visibly shrinking from him.

Solemn Saul paused, putting his hands behind him like one doing his utmost to resist temptation, heaving a dolorous sigh the while.

"Fer what am I, 'sides bein' a stranger? A pore, mis'able, ruined critter! A man that was a man once, but who is only a walkin' ghost—"

A faint shriek checked his gloomy speech, and a woman drew closer to his side like one mutely begging protection!

"Don't—pray don't speak of—ugh!" with a shiver that ended in a tremulous little sigh as she yielded to his ardent embrace. "If you knew what a holy horror I have of—of those dreadful creatures!"

"Dreadful no end!" mournfully acquiesced Sunday, discounting that musical sigh with one that seemed to come from the ground beneath his feet, so deep, so hollow, so full of woe was it. "An' how much more dreadfuler the wimmen does make 'em, too! Sometimes I'm clean 'shamed o' bein' a man, jest fer that!"

"I meant ghosts, stupid!" with a short laugh, drawing back as far as his long arm would permit. "And why are you so bitter against the women, pray tell me, sir?"

"Not ag'inst all," was the hasty reply. "Not ag'inst wimmen like you, Fanny—Miss Black, I meant to say, ma'am. But—Glory Ann!"

This time Fanny succeeded in her attempt to free herself, perhaps because the effort was made in earnest. And with her tall, willowy figure drawn erect, her face showing white in the star-light, she almost sharply demanded:

"Whom do you mean by Glory Ann? Who is she? What is she to you?"

"Wuss then nothin', honey—ma'am," stammered Sunday. "Jest a p'izen critter who—who run off with a handsomer man. Jest—"

Fanny struck down the hand that offered to touch her, drawing back and folding the cloak still more closely about her form.

"Not yet, Mr. Sunday, if you please," her tones almost freezing as they fell upon his ears. "I want to know more about this Glory Ann of yours. Why did she run off? Why did she have to run off from you, even with a handsomer man, as you put it? Answer me, sir!" and her foot tapped the ground sharply.

"Durn Glory Ann!" groaned the man of misery, the picture of dejection. "Wish't she'd done broke her pesky neck afore she got through runnin'!"

Fanny had borne herself bravely enough until now, but as though her emotions had gained the victory, her head drooped and the sounds of partially stifled sobs came to the ears of the man whom she had ventured forth to meet under the twinkling stars.

"Good Lawd! Fanny—ma'am—honey dove, don't!" spluttered Saul Sunday, catching the swaying figure in his arms and holding her as though his grip should never more uncloze.

"I thought—you were a—a single man!" sobbed the woman.

Solemn Saul groaned anew, but he was not so utterly miserable as to forget the quickest method of soothing a jealous woman. And through the night there echoed faintly the sounds of kisses long and kisses short, kisses that drowned those sobs in short measure!

"Fanny, you didn't ort—you wouldn't ef you only knowed how stingin'er then a p'izen dagger them sobs stick me clean to the heart o' me," huskily murmured Sunday. "An' as fer Glory Ann—"

"A married deceiver—and I thought—I hoped you were in—in earnest!" sobbed Miss Black, vainly trying to control her emotions.

"But I be in airnest, Fanny!" assured Saul, earnestly. "An' I ain't married no longer, fer—didn't Glory Ann slope with Preserved Polly-carp Piety?"

"But you haven't—been divorced?" timidly asked Fanny, lifting her face until her great dark eyes met his ardent gaze.

"Not yit, but I'm jest onto the p'int o' bein', honey dove," boldly asseverated Sunday. "I'm jest lookin' fer the last missin' link which 'll on-tie the knot that cost me ten—"

Fanny deftly escaped his arms, motioning her ardent lover back as he tried to renew his embrace.

"Not yet, Mr. Sunday, not until you can come to me in the broad light of day with full and ample proof that you are no longer the husband of that shameful creature who—who eloped with another!"

"You don't mean it honest, Fanny?"

"I do mean it, sir," with a stamp of her foot to emphasize the assertion. "If I had even dreamed that you were a married man—how could you so shamefully deceive a poor, confiding woman, Saul?"

"I didn't mean—they wasn't sca'cely time fer to tell," stammered Sunday, his head drooping, once more the Sad Man.

"And I dropped into your arms so readily, why not add, sir?" with a bitter laugh as she drew further away. "Well, I'll not sin on the same side again. Good-night, Mr. Sunday!"

"Don't—don't go off in a huff, honey dove," huskily cried Sunday, holding out his hands appealingly. "I won't never do it no more. I won't even tetch you ag'inst your own say-so. I'll git down on the two knees o' me an' beg—"

"You silly boy!" laughed Fanny, catching his hands as he was about to fit his actions to his words. "The ground is damp, and you'd catch the rheumatism, sure!"

"An' the boss'd ax what I meant by stainin' my rijimentals!" with a hollow sigh. "Ef you only knowed how tremenjous strict he is, Fanny! Ef you only hed sech—but your mistress ain't built that way?"

"She is very kind, and treats me more like a sister than a servant as a rule, though she is so cold and haughty to all others."

"So I've hearn tell—bout her bein' so mighty

cold, like. But her time'll come, an' then she'll be soft an' kind an' tender an' all the rest, to more'n you, little gal!" laughed Sunday, with all the airs of a man who thoroughly understands human nature.

"I can't think it," shaking her head decidedly. "Mistress is not like that. She fairly scorns the very shape of a man!"

"An' them is the very sort that is easiest to ketch when a man knows his business, honey dove. An' they is a man—I ain't sayin' who he is or who he *isn't*, mind ye, little gal," with another soft laugh. "I know a man who hes fell head over heels in love with your mistress, an' ef I kin win him anythin' like a fair chance to court her, I'm bettin' big money she won't scorn a man's shape no longer, nur— Good Lawd!"

Well might Solemn Saul break off with that ejaculation, for Fanny flashed a gleaming dagger before his very eyes!

CHAPTER XV.

SOLEMN SAUL GROWS ENTHUSIASTIC.

"DECEIVER! doubly a traitor!" cried the woman, aiming a vicious blow at the throat of the valet.

Had that stroke fairly gone home, Saul Sunday would surely have seen the end of his weary pilgrimage on this earth, but with an activity truly remarkable in one who so bitterly bemoaned his lot, the Sad Man eluded the weapon, catching Fanny by the wrist and holding her powerless while he ejaculated:

"Mournful Moses! what's bit ye now, honey dove? An' me jest ready an' weepin' fer to lay me down in the dirt to play h'arth-rug to them weenty, teenty little feet o' yours! An' you—Thar, Miss Black!" with a hollow sigh that might have come as a breath from the tomb as he released his grasp and presented his bosom to her blade.

"Ef you kin see even the ghost of a thought that ain't clean white an' truly yourn, Fanny, pin it to the backbone o' me! Ef you kin—"

Instead of dealing the blow, Fanny turned away to hide her face in her hands, sobbing bitterly. And when, a few moments later, Solemn Saul ventured to gently touch an arm, the glittering weapon had vanished as mysteriously as it had been flashed forth.

"Fanny—Miss Black—"

"Leave me, false, hard-hearted man!" with a nervous twitch that shook his touch off. "Wait until my mistress comes—save your soft speeches for her ears, and—"

"Git clean yanked out o' my rijimentals fer tryin' of it on, too!" spluttered Solemn Saul, starting back aghast. "Good Lawd! ef he was to ketch me doin' of it! Ef the boss was to—"

Fanny gave a little cry at this, grasping his arm and gazing keenly into his face by the starlight.

"You mean—you didn't mean that *you* were the man in love with my mistress, then?" she pantingly asked.

Solemn Saul stared into that pale, anxious, questioning face for a few moments, as though fairly unable to believe his own ears. Then, as the ridiculous truth flashed upon him, he actually broke into a laugh.

"Sufferin' grandpap o' sin an' sorer!" he chuckled as his long arms wound about the maid's waist, drawing her half-resistingly to his bosom once more, dropping a rousing smack deftly upon her pouting lips. "An' you tuck it that way? You wanted to stick a body fer—Fanny, honey dove o' never ceendin' delight! you didn't really think it? You wasn't actilly jealous—o' her 'nd me?"

"You said—what *did* you say?"

"Nigh as I kin come to 'memberin', now that I'm jest runnin' over with pure delight an'—Fanny, you've bin rubbin' honey onto them red lips o' yourn!"

Solemn Saul paused in his remarks long enough to again test his lover-like suspicions, then Fanny managed to draw her head back far enough to utter:

"Are you trying to evade my questions, Saul? Who is in love with my mistress, if not yourself?"

"My boss, fer sure," was the prompt response, with an air of genuine surprise that the query need be pressed so closely. "Didn't I say so time an' time ag'in afore—Fanny, you *hev* bin usin' honey! I thought it at fu'st, an' now I'm dead sure!"

With a sigh that seemed relief from a dreadful weight of doubt and torture, the woman yielded to his ardent embrace, making no attempt to cut his rapture short. And Solemn Saul hardly deserved that title longer, so thoroughly loverlike were his actions, his murmured words of praise and joy.

"Ef I didn't ketch a glimp' once in a while o' these p'izen rijimentals, I'd feel dead sure I'd died an' flopped up to heaven, Fanny!" her lover finally paused long enough to affirm, in awed rapture.

Fanny laughed softly, shyly, as she gently but firmly freed herself from that clinging embrace, murmuring:

"We must come back to earth, dear boy, and now—not another one until you have explained everything to me, Saul," her voice filled with a firmness which seemed to fairly intoxicate the

valet, though her forbidding gesture served to hold him in check.

"That's the wust o' sech things, honey dove o' pure delight!" he sighed, regretfully. "They don't last long enough for a hungry critter to git even a squar' taste afore they take to 'em-selves wings an' flop over the garden wall!"

"Can't say, I'm sure," with sudden tartness. "But *you* seem to have had plenty of experience! Perhaps that is what made you so late to-night! Perhaps you were detained by another—if I thought so!"

"Don't ye do it, honey—don't ye begin to do it!" hastily mumbled the startled valet. "Cross the heart o' me I hain't kissed even the ghost of a woman sense Glory Ann run away—*durn* Glory Ann!" and he spat viciously over his shoulder. "They's glory enough right into this very yardin fer sech as me, an'—"

"Business, Saul Sunday!" checking him with uplifted finger.

"Good Lawd!" sighed Sunday, with a long breath. "Ef you hed on the other kind o' clothes, an' ef they was a black baird all over the pretty face o' ye, an' your voice was double harsher then it is, I'd come mighty nigh thinkin' it was the boss checkin' of me up fer makin' a crooked slip!"

"Do you think you would really like such a boss, Saul?" softly laughed Fanny Black, seeming to forget the point she wanted to press.

"Would I?" echoed Saul, rolling up his eyes in ecstasy. "Wouldn't I! Fanny, pet, le's git to tryin' of it jest as quick as the law'll let us! Le's git right down—"

"And Glory Ann?" demanded Fanny, his unfortunate choice of terms seeming to recall the memory of that erring wife.

"Thar it is ag'in!" groaned the Sad Man, brushing a sleeve across his brows. "Tain't enough that the ole hag double-sulted me by 'lopin' with a weenty runt named Preserved Polycarp Piety, an' callin' him a handsomer man than her lawful husband—"

"It is because she is still your lawful wife," pointedly interposed Fanny Black.

"Wuss luck me!"

"And while you are legally bound to her, what right have I to—to even speak to you, Saul?" her tones growing unsteady. "How do I know that you are not the one at fault? How can I be sure that you did not run away, deserting your wife and—family?"

"Good Lawd! wuss an' wuss an' more a-comin'!" groaned Sunday, then desperately bracing up and adding: "Fanny, let me tell you jest how it all come about. I was young an' green, an' didn't know much 'bout the fair sex when Glory Ann roped me in. From the fu'st jump she tuck the—that is to say, she played boss. She said this must be that, an' t'other must be which. An' ef I didn't like it that way, all the more did it tickle her to stick right whar she jumped. An' so—Fanny," his tones growing even more earnest as he added: "Ef Glory Ann hedn't jumped over the fence, I'd 'a' tuck to stampedin' my own self!"

"If she eloped with another man, surely you were entitled to a divorce?" murmured the woman.

His teeth clicked together sharply, and his voice grew dogged:

"Mebbe so; but I didn't stop to think that way jest then. When I read the letter Glory Ann writ fer my welcome home ag'in, I tuck a solemn oath that I'd never settle down ontel I'd ketched 'em up an' lifted the skelp o' that p'izen Preserved Polycarp Piety! An' then, when the fu'st heat wore off, I couldn't git the divorce. Fer I hedn't a dollar left that I could call my own. I hedn't a fri'nd to my back. An' I hed a boss that wouldn't even let me think o' callin' on the law afore I showed myself a man—anyway, that's the way he put it."

"The gentleman in whose employ you are at present?" asked Fanny, drawing a little nearer, though still a bit coy and evidently on her guard against that familiar arm.

"Dandy Dutch, the Decorator from Dead-Lift—jes' so!" sighed the Sad Man.

"That is not his real name, of course, Saul," softly breathed the woman, now so near that her elbow touched his. "It is only one of those hideous nicknames which are so plentiful in these barbarous regions. What is his real name?"

"Andre Deutsch, an' I reckon he's a Jew," shortly replied Saul.

"I saw him to-day, and I think—shall I say what, Saul?"

"Durned ef I'm keerin'," sulkily.

"I think he's awfully handsome," cooed Fanny, clasping her hands as if in ecstasy. "So handsome—almost as handsome as—you, silly goose!" barely brushing his lips with hers, then springing lightly back beyond his reach, that bright blade playfully warning him to maintain a respectful distance.

"Then you—you ain't tumblin' in love with the boss, honey?"

"No more than you are falling in love with the mistress, Saul," her merry laugh changing to a sigh as she softly added: "We women can know but one love at a time, and you—I could kill her!"

"I only wish you could, fer sure, honey!"

sighed Sunday, then brightening up once more, and adding: "But sence you speak o' the boss, let me tell you jest how it all came about."

"Please do, Saul," drawing near once more, and only feigning to resist his gentle clasp, though she kept her face well shrouded in the folds of her cloak. "Please tell me everything. Why do you serve this Andre Deutsch! Why do you consent to wear such a livery, since you seem to dislike it? Why, Saul, I think it is just lovely!"

"So do I—ef *you* do, honey dove!" murmured the amorous valet. "I won't never wear anythin' else but—"

"Until you have won a divorce from Glory Ann, Saul."

"Glory Ann be—kin I cuss right hard, jest once, Fanny, dove?"

"If you go hide in the bushes where I can't hear you, Saul."

"Never mind; mebbe I kin git along 'thout doin' of it, ef you only won't keep on luggin' Glory Ann in by the heels," resignedly added the Sad Man. "But I was sayin'—whar was I, honey?"

"About to explain why you served your present employer, Saul."

"Beca'se he's the whitest man a pore, miserable critter ever run up ag'in when all the world 'peared sot dead ag'in him! Beca'se he lifted me out o' the mire an' quicksand o' despair, settin' me onto my feet ag'in, an' cheerin' me up to be a man ag'in! Beca'se—but I mought go on beca'se from now ontel the sun shows in the mornin', Fanny, 'thout beginnin' to show ye how white the boss is!"

"I can guess it. Like man, like master," softly cooed Fanny.

"Wish't I was like him, but mebbe the time 'll come ag'in when Saul Sunday kin lead the herd as he did afore—Fanny?"

"I am listening, dear."

"It'd take too much time to tell you jest how it come to be so, an' ef you wasn't so mighty skittish we could spend the time so much more 'greebler. Wouldn't it—"

"Not just now, Saul," shaking her head firmly. "Tell me about your master, please."

"Ef you will hev it that way, honey," with a feeble sigh of resignation. "An' so—the 'gree-ment was that in pay fer his pickin' me up out o' trouble. I was to sarve him faithful ontel I ketched up Glory Ann, or the boss got tired o' rovin' as a homeless sport. An' so—Fanny, little gal?"

"Well, Saul?"

"Don't you begin to see what I meant by talkin' all that 'bout your mistress? Don't you see ef we was able fer to fetch a match in sober airnest atwixt him an' her, that oath would be bu'sted wide open?"

"But Glory Ann, Mr. Sunday?" persisted the maid, gravely checking him.

CHAPTER XVI.

SOLEMN SAUL GAINS A POINT.

"D—DOGS bite Glory Ann!" almost howled the Sad Man from San Saba, recoiling from the object of his affections like one who has received a heavy blow full in the face. "Must that old hag contin'ally stick her ugly mug atwixt me an' the woman—angel I adore all over an' back ag'in? Must she ferever be—"

"Your wife until you procure a divorce, Saul," sighed Fanny, yet yielding only in her tones. "I have permitted you to presume far too much already, but I shall never do so again until—I can show you how very dear are your caresses without feeling my cheeks scorch with shame!"

"So be it, little lady," gravely said Sunday, seemingly powerfully impressed by her words and the manner in which they were delivered. "It's like pullin' teeth to know it must be so, after what I've—fer ef you hain't bin washin' your lips in honey dew, Fanny—"

"Hist!" lifting a hand and bending her head to peer keenly over the fence toward the more densely settled portion of the town. "Is that my mistress coming?"

The alarm proved to be a false one, but it served its purpose. Saul Sunday was chilled once more, and Fanny felt that she could trust him to come a little closer.

"You say your master has fallen in love with my mistress, Saul?" Fanny asked, after that alarm came to an end. "How can that be, when he has been such a short time in town?"

"How kin it be that I tumbled all over in love with you, honey?"

"But—well," with a shy laugh, "you saw my face by daylight, and he can't possibly have seen that of my mistress."

"Sufferin' grandpap!" with a flourish of his right hand, like one brushing aside a trifling obstacle. "That don't count with a 'way-up blood like the boss. He see her shape an' figger. He ketched a good look into the two eyes o' her 'crost the table last night, an' the way he rolled an' tumbled an' kicked off the kiver a'ter he went to bed! The way he tuck on 'bout them all! Ef I hedn't seen *you*, honey dove, an' knowed pritty nigh what was bitin' him, I do reckon I'd 'a' run fer the last doctor in town afore I'd git over the skeer it'd 'a' give me!"

Fanny sighed, nestling a little snuggler under his strong arm.

"I fear he'll never get cured if it depends on my mistress. Sometimes I'm almost certain she was born with a lump of ice for a heart, so far as mankind is concerned. She'll never give him a chance to see her, unless it is across the table; and then she is more an automaton than a woman of blood and flesh."

"Then—cain't we sorter put up a job onto her, little gal?" the valet coaxingly whispered. "She cain't stop over in-doors all the time. She must go out fer to take the air 'casionally? Then—what's the matter with givin' the boss a weenty hint like, so's he mought chance to stray over the same trail, an' never nobody know nuthin' how it happened that way?"

"Did he send you to propose such a scheme?" a little sharply.

"Don't you think it, honey dove," with spluttering eagerness lest he had taken a false step. "All he done was to write a note an' ax me could I find out whar the lady lived, an' would I be so kind as to try an' git that letter inside the door? An' I said I'd make the riddle or bu'st a trace. An' I come this way, never lettin' on that I'd see'd you, honey, be sure. An' I've got the letter right here—see?"

"I wouldn't dare!" murmured Fanny, shrinking back from the missive as though it was a terribly dangerous weapon that might "go off!"

"An' I wouldn't dare go back with the thing in my rijimentals, nuther. So, ef you won't drap it sorter by accident whar your mistress would be sure to stumble over it, I'll hev to wait an' watch until she comes home. An' ef she kicks up a racket—well, it'll be all of a piece with what I've hed to bear up onder these many a long day!"

Solemn Saul sighed lugubriously, yet with an undercurrent of earnestness that seemed to strongly affect his lady love.

"Not that—give me the letter, dear," choking back a sob. "She would shoot you at your first word, and that would kill—kill more than the one the bullet was meant for!"

"Pay the postage, honey?" coaxingly murmured Saul, paying himself without waiting to hear her answer. "An' ef it all comes 'round right, jest think what it'll mean fer us! Jest think!"

"What can it mean, save that she'll turn me adrift without a character if she so much as suspects my part in the trick!" sobbed Fanny.

"Then I'll see that you git a better place, an' a loving husband 'long with it, pritty chick," reassured Sunday. "Fer the boss'll back me up in all that, ef we manidge to fetch him an' your lady together. He said as much; anyway, he said ef he ever got good an' settled down to suit his notion, he'd give me any sized stake I was a mind to say. An' be sure I'll hit him hard—hit him afore the fu'st glow hes hed time to fade!"

"If it only comes out as you picture!" sighed Fanny, taking the missive.

"Be sure it will—it's jest bound to, honey dove. An'—take mighty good keer o' that dockymint, little lady. It's so chuck full o' love an' sweetness that ef the bumblebees gits a scent of it, they won't be even the enwollop left for your mistress—no sir!"

Fanny was on the point of speaking, when her restless eyes caught sight of a dark figure rapidly approaching the gate, on the further side, and with a subdued exclamation of alarm she caught Solemn Saul by the arm, drawing him hurriedly away from the path, into the denser shade afforded by the rank shrubbery.

"It's my mistress, coming home from the Oasis," she hurriedly breathed, pressing him down under cover. "If she suspects, all is lost!"

"Hunker down an' she cain't see neither of us, honey."

"No, I must be inside to greet her, or—wait, here until I can steal out again. I think I've got the idea you want. Promise me you'll wait, dear?"

"So long I'll take root ef yon don't come sooner, honey!" earnestly asseverated Saul. "Ef you'll give me jest—"

The boon was granted before he could complete the prayer. Fanny dropped a kiss upon his lips, then crouched low under cover, gliding off around the house, vanishing from his sight without a sound.

Solemn Saul turned his attention toward that other tall, lithe, graceful figure, watching its approach through the limbs before his face.

Even in the sober light he recognized La Masque, though a long cloak shrouded her figure.

She passed along to the front door, tapping sharply on the panel, the raps measured to form a signal which her maid was doubtless familiar with, for almost immediately the barrier was swung open to admit the cloaked figure, then closed again. And as he listened, Solemn Saul could hear the faint rattle of chains and bolts.

Settling down in a comfortable position, like one resigning himself to a spell of waiting, the Sad Man from San Saba sunk into deep thought judging from his grave face.

His waiting was far shorter than he could

have hoped, and he rose to his feet with a soft cry of delight as Fanny came hurriedly up.

"Be guarded, dear," she whispered, taking his arm and leading him toward the gate, though taking care to keep as completely under cover as the nature of their surroundings would admit. "La Masque suspects nothing, as yet, but she is so awfully suspicious! She has ears like a fox and eyes like a cat! If she should ever doubt me—"

"She won't do that, honey love," gently reassured Sunday. "Fer I won't tempt any resks by keepin' you out o' her sight any longer than to let me git onto that idee you hinted at. Not but what I'd love to putt in a solid month—an' every day a year long—talkin' to the sweetest, prittiest, neatest bit o' calico the big sun ever shone down onto; but I kin deny myself ef I have to!"

Fanny properly rewarded this lovely speech, then hastily added:

"I hardly dare let my mistress see that note, as yet. I fear it would only make her harder to win over by your master. But if he could manage to favorably impress her, first, then it might do good work."

"Jest give him the ghost of a show, honey, an' ef he don't melt the heart o' ice you talked about, then I don't want a cent!" confidently declared the valet. "You was goin' to say?"

"That La Masque spends every Sabbath day in the saddle, as a rule. I believe she intends to ride to-morrow, as usual, and if your master could manage to meet her, by accident, mind you, Saul!"

"He'll do it so slick he'd be willn' to make a davy it was clean by chaine, honey love!"

"You can give him the cue, then," with a sigh of relief, now that the words were fairly spoken.

"Which way does she gin'ally ride out in, though? What ef the boss was to take the wrong trail?" soberly asked Sunday.

"I'll find out to-night, or early in the mornin', and let you know," was the quick response. "You remember the corner where we first met?"

"As ef I could ever fergit it?" reproachfully murmured the lover.

"Then meet me there, early. I'll come, sure, so don't grow weary if you have to wait a bit," with a sigh of relief as she submitted to his ardent embrace once more.

Solemn Saul acted as though he knew his time was short as his appetite was huge, and surely Fanny had nothing to complain of in that line. And yet, she really seemed to enjoy the infliction!

Very properly, though, Fanny made the first move toward terminating that blissful interview, struggling free sufficiently to murmur:

"I really must, darling. La Masque—if she should call for me, and I not at hand immediately, she'd kill me!"

"An' I'd hang her with her own hair!" fiercely vowed Sunday, reluctantly relaxing his embrace, sighing like a furnace as he added:

"Ef that blessed corner was a little more lonelier in the mornin'! Ef it was all fenced up so nobody couldn't peep inside! Ef—"

"Don't be so silly, dear," laughed Fanny, drawing away. "I never did see such a man! You've kissed me enough—"

"Not enough, not nigh nur nothin' near enough, honey dove o' never-endin' delight!" the dreadfully lovesick valet declared, deftly clasping the treasure once more in his strong arms, and stifling her remonstrances after the most approved fashion.

But all things must find an ending, and so did that lovely parting, Solemn Saul standing still to watch the cloaked figure flitting through the yard and back to the rear of the dwelling.

When her figure was fairly lost sight of, Saul picked up his staff and strode rapidly away in the direction of the Oasis, where he had left his master at the faro table. And had Fanny Black caught the words which dropped from his lips as he hurried along through the night, she might well have termed him a base deceiver!

"Wonder if she swallowed it all? Somehow it hits me the old girl was entirely too willing! I played it the best I knew, but *did* it take her in? Time will tell, but I have my doubts. For all she tried to play the silly, lovesick girl, I fancy Miss Fanny Black is too smart, too well educated to pick up with a fellow trigged out as I am!"

Saul Sunday was still debating the matter in his busy brain, when the sounds of excited voices broke upon his ears, coming from no great distance ahead. And as he paused to hearken, he distinguished a well-known voice crying out:

"Down you go, anyway! And here's more of the same stuff!"

"Dandy Dutch, and he's in trouble of some sort!" gratingly ejaculated Saul Sunday, gripping his stout staff more firmly and darting at the top of his speed to the rescue.

CHAPTER XVII.

DANDY DUTCH MAKES A RECORD.

"AND if I should decline to deal for you alone, sir?"

"I'd blow my brains out, through pure chargin, ma'am!"

There was a striking contrast between the two voices, though each in its way was musical enough.

That of La Masque rung out cold, cutting, yet with an undercurrent of angry impatience to be detected by the practiced ear. And from behind her velvet mask, those dark eyes seemed to win a spark of actual fire, so vividly did they glow and shine in the lamplight.

That of the Decorator an adroit con mingling of sport and suitor, of bluff and submission, just as the one who listened chose to interpret his tones. And in the magnetic black eyes as they encountered the sparkling orbs of the faro queen, there was the same queer combination to be read.

For a single breath it was a duel of eyes, then La Masque looked down once more at the deck of cards her white-tipped fingers were so dexterously rippling.

"Is it death or life, fair lady?" persisted Dandy Dutch, leaning a trifle forward, thus covering from general view the strong meaning which he threw into his gaze, and which he dare not fully express by tone alone.

La Masque flashed a glance upward, but hardly long-lived enough to read his full meaning, one would have thought. If it had been, perhaps her voice would have been less cold, less steady in its response:

"I am paid to deal faro, not to sit in judgment on saint or sinner. As long as money or money's worth falls on the lay-out, it matters not to me whether it comes from one hand or a score."

"Even if that one hand belongs to me?"

"As well yours as another, just so your fingers let go freely," was the indifferent retort, as La Masque slipped the deck once more into the box, ready to begin a fresh deal.

"Come lightly, go easy," laughed the Decorator, parrying that shaft with gay good-humor. "If I had to work for the ducats, possibly my grip might stick tighter. But that isn't getting any closer to the kernel for which my teeth are just hungering. Gentlemen, I asked your figures for a little more elbow-room, but if you're not inclined to sell, I'll have to pull out for a more accommodating quarter. I never could bear even the thought of being hoodooed!"

"If there is any cause for dispute, perhaps I might be able to decide it, gentlemen," sounded the clear, cold tones of the proprietor as Aubrey Conyers came forward, his keen, watchful eyes seeing that the game was being delayed for some reason.

"The gentleman wishes full swing of the table, I believe," coldly explained La Masque.

"Provided I can buy the privilege, dear sir," amended Deutsch, with a careless glance over his shoulder at that blonde face. "Simply because I can't stand a hoodoo, and the very worst to me is to have any sport tack a tail to my system."

"Do you charge any one person with deliberately annoying you, sir?"

"Not through intention," was the frank response. "I've done the same thing when fortune gave me more kicks than smiles, but that don't make it any the less hoodoo. So—as I hate to jump a game while a winner—I just begged these gentlemen to sell me their space and time for a few minutes, to let me chew or get eaten up. Either way, your time won't be lost, dear sir."

Aubrey Conyers frowned a little, his jeweled fingers slowly threading his yellow beard as his blue eyes passed from face to face, pausing at length upon the mask across the table.

La Masque barely moved her head; it may have been inadvertently, but if it had really been a signal, the decision could not have come more promptly.

"It all rests with you, gentlemen," bowing so as to include all the remaining players at that one table. "Of course I can't say you shall or shall not play, but I may at least make a request: as a personal favor to the house, will you permit this gentleman to have his way, this once?"

"For a consideration, please," amended the Decorator, with a bow.

"This is not an auction room, I beg of you to bear in mind," just a little sharply interposed the proprietor. "If these gentlemen yield to your slightly unreasonable whim, it will be through pure courtesy to a stranger, not as hucksters. Your decision, gentlemen?"

There was but one answer possible after words like these, and a general consent was given, thus leaving the stranger sport a clear field; as to the favor, that lay concealed in the future.

This unusual dispute, if dispute it may be called, had attracted no little attention, and when the matter was finally arranged amicably, quite a crowd had gathered about that particular table, eager to see what it would end in.

Dandy Dutch glanced quickly over the triple line of faces, but what might have annoyed or disconcerted many another gambler, only drew a fleeting smile to his face. Then he turned his whole attention to the game before him.

He bowed gravely to La Masque, who re-

moved her hands from the top of her box, laying bare the first card. Dandy Dutch pricked it off on his cue-card, then quickly yet deliberately placed several bets on odd cards, apparently at random. If, as his former words had seemed to infer, he was playing on "a system," that system was yet an undiscovered secret, even to La Masque.

Steadily as an automaton La Masque performed her duties. In silence Dandy Dutch saw his losses removed from the painted cloth, or took down his winnings when paid by those deft hands over the board.

Cold and silent stood Aubrey Conyers at the shoulder of his queer patron, his handsome face like a mask of stone so far as outward emotion went, though each loss and each winning was enough to count up a modest fortune in the eyes of a poor man.

And without stir or murmur the interested ranks behind him stood and noted each change made in that silent duel between man and woman.

Whether or no La Masque alwas dealt a perfectly "square game" is neither here nor there. Certain it is that she did so on this particular occasion, if only because to do otherwise would be almost certain detection. For hardly once did Dandy Dutch remove his steady gaze from those supple fingers, and with his long experience at the game, cheating was rendered next thing to impossible.

As the second deal drew near its end, and Dandy Dutch silently placed a heavy stake that, to those thoroughly acquainted with the game, silently "called the turn," the eager lookers-on stirred noisily as they crowded closer to see the result.

"Steady, gentlemen, if you please?" sharply uttered Conyers, a hand slipping into his bosom to close upon a convenient weapon. "Crowd in at your peril! This may be the tiger, but it must eat him up fair, or suffer the loss of its claws!"

The ghost of a smile played about the lips of the Decorator from Dead-Lift, and his keen eyes never wavered in their steady watch. This outbreak might be well-intended, or it might be a cunning trick to cover the deft touch of the faro queen.

If the latter, it failed completely. La Masque made no suspicious motion, and a moment later she slowly exposed the last cards. And then a low murmur ran through the crowd, for they saw that the bold gambler had actually "caught the turn!"

"Permit me to congratulate you, sir," quietly uttered Conyers, apparently unmoved by the heavy loss and not even glancing toward the woman who was paying over the winnings. "Next to winning, I enjoy losing to a thoroughbred."

"Thanks," nodded Dandy Dutch, coolly. "I thought I could break the hoodoo set afoot by that worthless rascal of mine. You had him kicked out, of course?"

"He has gone, but I believe it was without assistance."

"I know where to find him," with a yawn while waiting for La Masque to shuffle her cards. "He'll send a policeman to my hotel in the morning, for bail. By this time I should judge he is hunting a particularly muddy gutter or ditch for a bed. That means another suit of livery! Well," with a lazy sigh, "they come high, but we must have 'em!"

La Masque slipped the deck into its receptacle, glancing up in token that all was in readiness for a fresh encounter. She caught those jetty orbs fixed upon her own, and the fact seemed to irritate her, judging from the sharp manner in which she spoke:

"All set, if you please, sir! Time is precious, if you really want to make a break, for midnight is drawing nigh."

Dandy Dutch deftly spread a number of bets, playing some cards to win and others to lose; resuming his close watch on those nimble fingers opposite.

The deal progressed, at first quite unfavorably for the Decorator, as the three bets first decided went in favor of the bank. But he gave no sign, for he felt confident that the deal was being squarely made.

Then a change came, and he repeatedly won, steadily building up the pile of notes, gold coin, and colored chips before him. And for the second time that night he caught the turn at the end of the deal.

Not even the stern presence of Aubrey Conyers could awe the audience into silence after that. They seemed almost as excited and exultant as they could have been were the winnings their own, and more than one of their number reached out hands with which to congratulate the Decorator on the record he was making for himself.

"It's a little way I have, when the moon is in the dark," lightly laughed Dandy Dutch, nodding his curly head in response. "Sorry for you, friend Conyers, but I can't go back on my luck, you know!"

"All for the good of the trade," bowed the proprietor. "What we lose to you, we'll more than pick up from venturesome gentlemen who'll attempt to break your record."

"Then I'll pile the figures a little higher," laughed Deutsch.

During this interchange, La Masque was busy counting out the last winnings, but now she drew a tiny watch from her bosom, glancing at the enameled dial, then coldly pronouncing:

"You will have to make your strokes count, then, for I'll have barely time to finish another deal before midnight."

"Which means?" ventured Dandy Dutch.

"That I never turn a card after the hands join at twelve," was the icy cold response.

"I'll do my little best to fill her place, dear sir, if you are not satisfied to stop short off," blandly said Conyers, his blue eyes glowing vividly.

"Thanks, awfully, dear fellow, but do you know I'm just a bit inclined that way myself? I never gamble on the Sabbath. But I'll give the royal Bengal a square chance to recoup, for I'm no hog, if I do grunt occasionally."

Deftly separating his winnings from his original capital, Dandy Dutch divided it into four portions, placing each on a separate card, then leaning back in his seat to await the result.

Without the slightest show of emotion, La Masque began to deal the cards, a number falling on either side before a single wager was decided. That the bank won, but in rapid succession Dandy Dutch won the remaining three.

La Masque quickly counted out his winnings, then rose from her chair, bowing to the sport who had fared so well at her hands, saying:

"I never break my rule, sir, so I must stop dealing. But I'll be at my post Monday evening, when I trust you will give me my revenge."

"I'd give it all for just one smile from those sweet lips!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

HUNGRY FINGERS AND BROKEN PATES.

AUDACIOUS enough the speech, but even Dandy Dutch was not entirely lost to ordinary prudence. He also had risen to his feet, and while leaning over the table as if to secure his winnings, he softly whispered those words close to the ear of the woman in the velvet mask.

If La Masque heard, she gave no sign. Without another word she turned from the table, passing along to the rear of the gaming hall, opening a narrow door through which she vanished from view.

Dandy Dutch watched her exit, then occupied himself in stowing away the cash among his winnings, stacking up the chips and pushing them across the table toward Aubrey Conyers, who had taken possession of the vacated chair.

"Just to follow custom, you know, dear sir," smiled Dandy Dutch, as he did this. "For, of course, it'll all come back to your coffers before it gets fairly warm in my pockets."

"Pay as we go is our rule," smiled the proprietor, cashing the checks at once. "Yet, if I may say as much without offense, you are no true gamester."

"What particular point am I lacking in?" laughed Deutsch.

"That of knowing how to follow a streak of luck clear through. With your vein, to-night, you might own the Oasis before day dawns!"

"And cut my throat before the week ended. Couldn't stand that, you know. Wasn't built for a landlord. Free foot and plenty of room for change of pasture is what makes me fat and saucy!" laughed the Decorator, as he finished stowing away his winnings.

"It's money in my pocket, your thinking that way," smiled Conyers, as he made a sign that brought another dealer to take his place at the faro-table. "Still, I felt it only right to read you that little lecture, just as I'd expect a sport to read the same to me. Not that I'd really need the hint, understand."

Dandy Dutch properly acknowledged the speech, stifling a yawn as he slowly moved away from the table where he had that night won a modest fortune, and at the same time made for himself a record as a bold and skillful player, which would not soon be forgotten in Prospect.

If 'all the world loves a lover,' all that portion of it given to games of chance certainly admires a successful gambler, and Dandy Dutch found it no easy matter to make his way from the hall to the saloon. He was surrounded by strangers, each one of whom had something to say in congratulation, and the majority of whom openly praised his luck.

"Lucky?" echoed the sport, skillfully disguising another yawn. "I always am lucky. Reckon I was born that way."

He at length succeeded in passing the division and entering the saloon, where he tossed a number of gold coins upon the bar, saying:

"For the good of the house, gentlemen, and as a particular favor to me, a stranger just now, but a friend and comrade in the near future I'm impudent enough to predict, don't let moss grow on the glasses! Drink hearty, and drink often! And with each swallow may some of my luck fall upon each and every one of you!"

"Isn't that rather tough on us?" laughed Aubrey Conyers.

"When you go bu'st I'll don the fur and invite you in to clip my claws," retorted Dandy Dutch, but with a smile that robbed his words of their sting. "And, don't you see, my good

wishes took in the house, as well as the customers?"

"I'm not kicking, only as a favorite horse tries to make you dodge through pure affection. Next to winning, I love to lose. And, if you'll not blush too hearty, I'll add that I never met a better winner than Andre Deutsch."

There was some more light talk, in which the Decorator amply kept up with the procession, then he bade the hilarious company good-night, pleading loss of rest for a week past as his excuse for tearing himself away at such an early hour from such excellent company.

Dandy Dutch left the Oasis behind him at a rapid gait, going for some little distance in the direction of his hotel, but then turning down a side street and finally taking a course that would, if continued long enough, carry him to the dwelling occupied by La Masque.

But if such was his intention he was fated not to carry it out, for as he passed from the gloom into a little lighted space, remote from any building giving evidence of its people being afoot, several dark figures leaped out upon him in a most vicious attack.

Only an accident, trifling in itself, gave the sport a chance for his life, for the ambush was snug, the plans for his death or robbery almost perfect. And only for a slip on a loose stone, causing the unlucky rascal to give a startled grunt in trying to recover himself, Andre Deutsch might never have realized his peril, in this world.

As it was, he turned and ducked as by instinct, thus avoiding those initial strokes.

"Down him fer keeps, durn ye!" harshly grated one of the thugs who was carried past the sport by that unexpected dodge.

"Down you go!" cried Dandy Dutch, shooting out a hard fist the length of his muscular arm, striking the speaker on the jaw and tumbling him endlong a dozen feet away. "And here's more of the same stuff!"

Nor was he at all stingy in dispensing the article, either!

By the dim light of the stars Dandy Dutch could see that his assailants carried bared blades, but with his fighting blood fairly up, he cared little for that. Nor did he attempt to make use of the firearms with which he was supplied, for more reasons than one.

Mining-town though Prospect was, it had passed that stage where men might use pistols without drawing a crowd in short order, to give the offender a severe taste of the law. And even with his life at stake, Andre Deutsch preferred not to have his name mixed up in an open court trial.

Trusting to his remarkable activity, his skill as a pugilist, his keen eyes and cool nerve, the sport dodged the blows and thrusts as best he could, at the same time striking sharp and true whenever he could find an opening. Twice he sent a man reeling back, and as yet he had escaped without a scratch, when a tall figure came leaping on the scene, harshly crying:

"Sock it to 'em, boss! An' thar's one fer your nob, critter."

The last words were almost drowned by a ringing crack as his stout staff fell upon the skull of a thug who was trying to win a thrust from behind the sport. And that villain had hardly measured his length upon the ground before another was keeping him company.

"'Nother turned sleepy!" laughed Solemn Saul, whirling around and doubling up the third man with a terrible stroke across his middle. "Whar's the rest o' em? Sufferin' grandpap o' sin an' sorrow, an'— Hold on, you!"

The fourth and last of the thugs—the same whom Dandy Dutch had knocked down when the row opened—was scudding away at the top of his speed, which certainly was not lessened by the indignant command sent after him by the Sad Man from San Saba.

"Good riddance to him, pard!" cried Dutch, checking Sunday, as he showed signs of starting in pursuit. "They've done me no hurt, and we can't afford to mix up in a court trial, don't you know?"

"Go it is, if you prefer it that way, pard," was the easy response, as Saul stooped over the first of the men whom his staff had felled. "But we'll have time enough to take a few notes, and— I thought so!"

A short, hard laugh broke from his thin lips, as he held a lighted match close to the face of the senseless rascal, revealing the ugly features of Under-shot Dan Frick.

"I thought I recognized the rascal as he tried to stick you from behind, and I let him have it all the harder. Unless his skull is made of iron, there'll be rejoicing in the Frick family to-morrow. For they can't grieve over such a dirty whelp—think?"

Dandy Dutch was examining the other two men, one of whom shrunk feebly away from the burning match, but he could not place them with certainty, though he fancied he had seen at least one of the pair at the Oasis.

Throwing away the match, he tapped Sunday on an arm, and moved rapidly from the spot, keeping where the shade lay deepest until at a safe distance from the ambushade.

"I rather more than half expected something of the sort," he said, as they walked on toward

the hotel, "but I thought I'd given them the slip before turning toward the house. I'm not just sure I'd have come out with a whole hide, but for you, pard!" gripping Sunday's hand with a warmth and seeming equality that would have opened the eyes of many who had laughed at that by-play at the Oasis.

"You ought to have used your guns," with a frown. "There's too much at stake for either of us to risk being crippled just now!"

"I took the chances, and all's well," lightly laughed the sport. "What luck, pardner!"

"Good as I expected, but wait until we're safe under lock and key. I'll need all that time to get the taste out of my mouth!"

The delay was not long, for a few minutes carried them to the Occidental Hotel, Saul Sunday once more the meek, long-suffering valet, while Dandy Dutch played the languid, capricious master.

Pausing in the office barely long enough to count out and deposit the amount of his winnings at the faro table, taking the clerk's receipt for the same, Dandy Dutch yawningly ordered his valet to show him up to his room.

Once safely inside the chamber, the two men resumed their real relations, Saul Sunday showing himself the equal if not the superior.

"I played it as fine as I knew how," he added, after giving a condensed account of his night's work. "I gave and took kisses enough to make me dread the very idea of more gum-sucking for an age to come!"

"Then Fanny took it all in?" laughed Dandy Dutch, exultantly.

"I'm not so mighty sure," frowned Sunday. "She took it entirely too readily, and though she played her part well, I'm half-way inclined to think she was playing me, even as I tried to play her."

"You don't do yourself half-credit, to say nothing of that gorgeous livery, Saul," laughed Dandy Dutch, maliciously.

"That's all right, pard," with a grim nod. "You think you've got the softest end of the bargain, and I don't know but what you're right in so thinking. But we're each fitted to the part we can wear best, and just so we get there, in the end, I'm willing to grin and bear it. But will we?"

"Dead sure!" was the confident response. "All I ask is one fair sight at that face. And if she goes out riding to-morrow, I'm open to bet all my ducats that I lift that jealous mask before the ride is at an end!"

"Will it be what you think, even then?" frowned Sunday.

"My reputation on it!"

"Well, I'll try to think that way, but all the same I'm feeling in my bones that you're on the wrong track. I'd heap rather investigate the major. I believe it would pan out more to our liking."

"I'll admit that you don't often go wrong in your guesses, pard, but I'm pretty certain this is one of the rare exceptions. However, each one to his own taste. You follow up the gallant major, and I'll pin my faith to La Masque."

"Keep your eyes open for a trap, then. I can't get it out of my head that Fanny was playing me for a—well, sucker!" with a grimace.

"Of course that is possible, but even so, it can only be to help along her fair mistress," with a laugh. "You'll meet the maid, of course?"

"Got to! One thing—bless the sunlight and the public place of meeting! I've kissed my lips raw as it is, and any more would make me even more melancholy than the world of Prospect already believes!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SCHEMERS IN COUNCIL.

"It isn't the money I'm kicking over, though it knocks the profit crooked for a whole quarter. What hurts me deeper is letting the infernally cool fellow get out of the den without feeling the claws—mine, if not the tiger's!"

Aubrey Conyers uttered these words, and there was little of his usual calm immobility to be seen in his blonde face just now. The mask which he wore in public was laid aside now he had only a tested comrade in evil to note the changes of his features.

That comrade was none other than Major Holly Gardenhire, and the two men were snugly retired in the private room over the rear of the Oasis, which was held sacred to the use of Conyers and that of the friends in whom he could place implicit trust.

The hour was quite late, or early, as the reader prefers, since the duel between Dandy Dutch and La Masque across the faro-table was a thing of the past; and it was to the heavy winnings of the Decorator from Dead-Lift that the blonde gambler alluded.

"We can't afford a racket of that sort, and you ought to know why," a little sharply retorted the major, his dark eyes snapping.

"Don't I know it?" just showing his teeth through the yellow line of hair. "Only for that—but let it drop. Talking it over only sets me on fire. And—the Jewish rascal gave me double chance if I wanted to jump him, too!"

"Then he had a reason in it, be sure!" frowned

ed Gardenhire, pushing a portion of his bristling beard between his teeth, biting it viciously. "I thought as much myself, only this afternoon, when—"

Aubrey Conyers cut him short with a hard, sneering laugh.

"You burnt powder, then, yet you lecture me because I felt tempted to do much the same."

"Two wrongs never make a right. I played the fool there, and I'm free to admit as much. But if you only knew how infernally tempting that little angel—Bah!" with a laugh at his own ardor, flushing hotly as he saw Conyers smiling beneath his beard. "We're both too hot in blood to play a safe or perfect game, pardner."

"It would have been over by this, if you hadn't tried to be too certain," grumly muttered the Oasis proprietor, his sharp teeth emitting an audible click as they prepared a fresh cigar for lighting.

"It will soon be over, and all the safer for just those extra precautions. Up to this very day not a single slip has been made. Can you put a finger on a single point which you could have bettered, had I left you foot-free and unhampered, Conyers?"

"I'd have wound it all up last week, as you know; but let that pass. You and I can't afford to quarrel at this stage of the game, major," with a half-sneer as he pronounced the military title. "The main point now is—what and who are these two queer cusses?"

"Bloodhounds, or I'm widely off my guess."

"On our scent, think?"

"That's the rub!" and Gardenhire frowned darkly. "Sometimes I fear they are, and then I can't make it come clear, at all. Sometimes I more than half believe they are nothing more than they claim to be: a crack-brained sport, with an idiot whom he has picked up and started in a groove just to attract attention. I've known the like, in tougher towns than Prospect."

"He's sport, that's clear enough," with a short, ugly laugh. "Only a thoroughbred could have kept his nerve through the rube I gave him under cover. They never fazed him. He played his game through, and a mighty good game it was, too!"

"That's one thing which makes me doubt his being a detective," nodded Gardenhire. "Of course some of them know how to fight the tiger, but hardly like that. It takes a man all his time to learn to become a thoroughbred, and if he tries to do both that and follow clues to an end at the same time, odds are that he'll make a botch of both trades."

For some little time there was silence between the pair, each evidently full of sober thoughts. Then Gardenhire broke the silence:

"Young Mann didn't put in an appearance to-night?"

Conyers shook his head.

"If he did, he never got further than the bar."

"Afraid you'd dun him for a wad on account, maybe," with a harsh laugh and a vicious glitter in his dark eyes. "Pard, I'm afraid we'll lose a snug little sum on that speculation. I'm thinking the young blood will take to his heels, one of these dark nights!"

There seemed to be an agreeable jest concealed somewhere in this speech, judging from the manner in which the two schemers laughed and interchanged glances. And with a cheeriness rather remarkable in one who seemed to anticipate the loss of a considerable sum already due him, Conyers had a strangely happy tone as he retorted:

"I'm not worrying very deeply, major. If he does run, I'll look to you for getting me square—after you've roped the heiress!"

"I sealed the bond to-day, and so we'd both ought to be content."

Conyers suddenly turned grave again, his brows wrinkling curiously as he gazed into the face of his partner in evil.

"What made you jump the line so brash, pard? Of course you ought to know your business best, but to me it looks like a mighty foolish break, just as matters stand."

"You want to know why I kissed the young lady?"

Conyers nodded assent. And from the light which filled his eyes as he leaned over the table, his desire was very strong indeed.

"Because I was an ass," coolly uttered Gardenhire. "Because I let my hot blood cloud my brain. Because the best and wisest of us all must make an occasional false step, just when such a slip can do the most harm. Now you know; how do you like it?"

Rather curiously, Conyers seemed relieved by this confession. For, though he took care not to openly say as much, he had been sorely troubled on hearing of that little event. It was not down on the programme, and he wondered if the major was not playing a double game.

He knew that Major Holly Gardenhire was as thorough-paced a rascal as himself, and he could readily give him credit for cheating on both sides of the board. What troubled him most was the impossibility of guessing just how the major proposed to turn the trick.

"I had no such idea when I waylaid the little

lady," added the major, leaning back in his chair and staring upward through the curling smoke that ascended from his cigar. "All I intended then was to give her a hint how deeply the young fellow was involved. To let her see at least the shadow of the pitfall awaiting her cousin, and at the same time frighten her into keeping all secret lest her grim old dad bounce his promising nephew. But you understand all that?"

Conyers nodded assent. The plot had been thoroughly discussed between them long since. What interested him the most was to learn how the usually cautious, cool-headed major came to so widely depart from the line marked out for his feet.

"I thought it would all be smooth sailing, for I never gave the girl credit for half as much spunk," admitted the major, frowning until his eyes almost buried themselves under his shaggy brows. "I counted on scaring her into meekness. Instead, I woke up a very cat!"

"All the more reason why you should play cool," commented Conyers.

"Thank you for nothing," snapped Gardenhire. "I've owned up to playing the fool. Don't try to rub it in. I may play the fool some more, if the temptation comes my way strong enough."

Conyers flushed and his eyes sparkled angrily, but he kept his seat and his silence. It was too far along in the game they were both playing to admit of an open quarrel. After—well, that would be a different matter.

"You're wise in your generation, pardner," nodded Gardenhire, his tones becoming more natural. "And as a reward, I'll finish telling you just how I came to muddle the matter."

"She cut me deep by so plainly trying to dodge me. I'd begun to hope that, with the old man's favor, I was winning my way into her good graces to perfection. As it was, the little minx opened my eyes so wide the lids haven't done aching even yet!"

"Well, I sprung the trap on her by a bit of dodging, and of course I couldn't take a hint, even when she offered me a kick with it. Business is business, and just then I was its prophet."

"Never mind just how I opened fire. As nearly as circumstances would permit, I stuck to the line we blocked out between us. I let her see that there were quite a few things about her promising cousin of which she had held not even the ghost of a suspicion until I, as a friend, thought it only right that her eyes should be opened to the whole sad truth before it was eternally too late."

"Then she began to kick. She wouldn't have it so, even after I had pulled a fistful of documents to back up my words. And then, for the first time I began to lose my head."

"As a bluff I dared her to call at the bank and see me face her hero with proofs of his double life. And I'm cursed if she didn't actually jump at the offer!"

"Just like a woman," nodded Conyers. "But you could have turned her aside, I should think?"

"That's just what I meant to do, in the end. But I thought it'd work in my way if the citizens could see us walking arm-in-arm under the sun, and when the little angel gripped me by the fin, afraid I'd try to dodge the issue, what else could I do but start to face the music?"

"Everything seemed to work my way, too!" with a frown and an impatient tossing of his cigar stump into the spittoon. "We caught sight of the daddy just entering his bank, as we came to the corner, and that gave me all the chance I needed. Lida wilted right then and there. For the first time she showed how deeply my little tale had impressed her, for all her bluffing."

"I ought to have let well enough alone, of course. It is so easy to look back and see where the crooked steps were taken! But I thought I'd kill yet another bird with my bolt, and so moved ahead as soon as I could quiet the little angel a bit."

"Not that I intended to do more than simply walk slowly past the bank, trusting to luck that Mann would catch sight of us, arm in arm and apparently on the most confidential terms imaginable. I knew she was too badly frightened to dare enter the bank without actually forcing her to do so. I could pass right on and she'd like me all the better for it, don't you see?"

"But you didn't pass on—worse luck!" frowned Conyers.

"Because I caught sight of Dudley Mann glowering at us as though he wanted to bite my head off. And to give him something to scowl for, I played the ass; but I won a kiss by it, anyway!" with a short, reckless laugh.

"He jumped you, and you tried to shoot him?"

"I really meant to do it, too," with a vicious nod. "But he came through the window instead of through the door like a Christian. And then that scarecrow in black and yellow caught me foul."

"I know. You reported all that followed. And yet you can doubt that those two fellows are jumping into our game!"

"Because I can't see how they could possibly

have got wind of it. We've played altogether under cover, as yet, and so—"

"Mayn't it be because of the past? Mayn't they be looking for—well, either you or me for work long finished?"

Major Holly Gardenhire gave a start, his eyes filling with a reddish glow, like one to whom a fresh source of danger is being revealed, but before he could make any reply to that deliberate question, a tiny bell suspended directly above the head of the bed standing in one corner of the room, set up a silvery tinkling!

CHAPTER XX.

A WORD OF WARNING.

BOTH men sprung to their feet, the movement awakening no echo, thanks to the thick carpet covering the floor. Their eyes turned toward the one door of the room, and each man gripped a weapon while waiting in breathless suspense for what might follow.

It was a cunning device invented by Aubrey Conyers himself, for the purpose of giving him timely warning of the approach of a visitor, welcome or otherwise. The weight of a foot upon a certain one of the stairs set the bell to ringing loudly enough to waken a light sleeper like the gambler, though without volume enough to pierce that thick door to give the one coming an equal warning.

A very brief pause sufficed to relieve the suspense which the two schemers experienced, for as a soft, steady tapping echoed through the door, Conyers replaced his weapon with a long breath of relief.

"It's one of the boys," he muttered, turning to his companion. "If you'd rather not be seen, pardner, there's the closet."

"Never mind me. So long as it's one of the family, I'm not caring," replied Gardenhire, resuming his seat and selecting a fresh cigar, while Conyers crossed the room, turning a key, and admitting the one who rapped.

"It's you, Vic Tolley, is it?" the gambler said, closing and securing the door again.

"It's me, an' more o' me than I like, wuss luck!" came a half-angry reply, as the fellow gingerly touched his left jaw.

"Got a head put on you, eh?" laughed Conyers, as his keen eyes noted the unusually prominent feature. "I thought you usually did the slugging? How comes it, eh?"

"That's jest what fetched me here, boss," his tones growing earnest as the burly fellow drew nearer the light standing on the table. "You know Under-shot Dan?"

"The tin-horn gambler—yes," with a curt nod.

"Well, Dan jumped onto me in a mighty hurry to-night, sayin' that a bloke was up to the Oasis, rakin' in the scads with both hands, an' that it'd be a howlin' shame ef he was let git off with the hull boodle, don't you see?"

"You mean Dandy Dutch?" sharply demanded Gardenhire.

"I don't know so much about the 'Dutch,' but the 'Dandy's' all right enough," grinned the rough, one hand lifting to caress his badly swollen jaw. "An' it wouldn't be so mighty fur out o' the way ef you was to add daisy, too!"

"You jumped on him and got the butt end of the bargain, then?"

"I got the butt-end of a airtquake, from the way it felt then," still grinning, though with precious little mirth in the grimace.

"And the fellow you tried to down?"

"Was mighty piert when I come to think I hed mighty 'portant business waitin' fur me right on the furder side o' town, boss."

"Business be it, and the quicker you settle down to it, Tolley, the less apt you'll be to have a check to match that biggest one," coldly interposed Conyers, dropping into the seat he had vacated at the alarm of his bell-trap. "Short and sweet; spit it out!"

"Thar was me an' Downey Dick an' Billy the Cricket, an' Under-shot 'lowed thar'd be plenty scads fer a divide. An' he 'lowed they wouldn't be any too many in the bunch, fer he said we'd find a mighty tough nut to crack. An' we did; so durn tough the crackin' was all done onto we that was to play the hammer—wuss luck!"

"You don't say that one man got away with the four of you?" grimly laughed Conyers, with a fleeting glance at his fellow-plotter.

"I don't say that he wouldn't, but it didn't need he should. He got away with me—bad!" again touching his jaw. "I thought I hed him dead to rights in the dark, but he ducked what I tried to lend him, an' paid me back, too mighty slick! I lay down a bit, an' when I got up ag'in they was a tall cuss with a club, just layin' Under-shot down fer keeps, I'm thinkin'."

"That infernal valet!" flashed Gardenhire.

"He didn't seem to val'ie the boys wuth a cent, anyway," grinned Tolley. "An' as I tuck my leave, I see him lay out the last son of-a-gun. Even that wasn't 'nough fer him. He hollered wouldn't I wait, but I knowed him too mighty well fer mindin'—bet your sweet life!"

"You knew him, you say?"

"Long afore I met him in Prospect, boss," suddenly growing sober, even frightened if his looks be taken as a standard. "I see him

down in Quiverin' Asp, an' I hearn tell of his tricks in Falcon City, an'—"

"Was it he, then? Anything worse than a crack-brained idiot?"

"As much wuss as a rattler in August is then a garter-snake in Jinnewerry!" was the emphatic rejoinder. "He's playin' much the same sort o' game up this way as he did down yender, from what I've picked up sence I tried this bit of a speculation; little joker, sufferin' grandpap an' all!"

"You mean he is a detective, then?" slowly asked Gardenhire.

"I don't mean nothin' else, boss, 'cept that ef it wasn't that I felt in duty bound fer to put you two gents up to his little racket, you wouldn't find me inside o' Prospect this minnit. An' now I've done posted you, I'm goin' to hunt a hole whar I'll feel heap sight more comftabler then in this same bergh—I jest be!"

He turned as though to at once begin his flight, but Aubrey Conyers was not yet satisfied, and held him in check, questioning him closly about Solemn Saul, and his reasons for feeling so positive that the valet to Dandy Dutch was a detective.

There is no especial need for his recital to be given in full. It is enough for our purpose to add that Vic Tolley gave the plotters ample food for thought during the next few minutes, proving beyond the possibility of a doubt that the pretended valet was a person to be dreaded by all who were engaged in so desperate a game as they were playing.

He stubbornly refused to linger in Prospect, even when Conyers covertly threatened him with the penalty usually visited on those who refused to abide by family laws, and finally he was permitted to take his departure to go where he saw fit.

"Well, what do you think of it now, pardner?" asked Conyers when they were left alone together.

"About the same thoughts as your own, of course," frowned Gardenhire. "And yet, I can't fully believe they have anything to do with our game here. They must be tracking some other game."

"You found them at the bank to-day. Dandy Dutch seemed acquainted with Leonard Corwin. Then their coming in here to-night. Isn't that evidence sufficient for a hog?"

"You're the best judge of that, pard," with a short laugh that softened the taunt. "All the same, I can't really think that way. And even if what you fear should prove the truth, we've gone entirely too far to back down now. Why, man, just think of it!" with glowing eyes. "The game is won, all but raking down the stakes!"

"Little good they'll do us if we get raked down at the same time!"

Major Gardenhire leaned across the table, gazing keenly, curiously into the face of his comrade, seeming to find much of interest therein, judging from the length of that stare.

Conyers sat in sullen silence, his eyes downcast, his face far paler than ordinary, though his mode of life was not conducive to color.

"I never thought to see *you* lose nerve just for one man—"

"For two devils, say!" flashed the athletic gambler. "If that man-monkey is a detective, then his pretended master must be tarred with the same stick. And—knowing all this, I can't help thinking that his queer manner to-night at the table means more than lies on the surface. You ought to know that, man!"

"I know this much," laughed Gardenhire, softly. "I know that the Decorator from Dead-Lift seemed mightily struck with our fair enigma in black velvet, and lace. I know that, if properly coaxed, La Masque can easily get at the truth of the matter, or I'm no good judge of human nature. And if you agree to my plans, there will be a test made in short order that will show us how much or how little we have to fear from these two fantastics."

"It might work!" mused Conyers, yet with that strange and unusual look of anxiety, almost of fear, on his handsome face.

"It shall work, I give you my word," declared Gardenhire, rising from his seat and moving toward the door that led to the lower floor. "Sleuth though Dandy Dutch may be, in La Masque we can work up a bait so dainty that he'll jump into the snare with both eyes open!"

"And that devilish valet of his?"

"I'll agree to put him out of the way of giving us trouble, if I have to put him to sleep with my own hands!" grimly nodded the major.

CHAPTER XXI.

SOLEMN SAUL AND HIS SWEETNESS.

DESPITE the late hour at which he had sought his chamber on the night before, Andre Deutsch was one of the earliest risers in the Occidental Hotel that clear, pleasant Sabbath morning, and, as a matter of course, his valet was also afoot, though with many a groan and yawn-punctuated grumble at the perversity of mankind and his wretched lot in life.

Yet Solemn Saul took care that his master should not suffer by tasting the cool mountain air too long on an empty stomach, and thanks

to a visit to the "lower regions" and a judicious outlay of small silver, an early breakfast was furnished the valet for his master, and so liberally that neither of the twain had aught left to complain of when the dishes were sent back.

There was no business discussed between the twain, master and servant to all the rest of the world for the time being. All had been decided upon the night before, and now it only remained for each to play his allotted part to the best of his ability.

With all his doubts as to the complete infatuation of Fanny Black, Saul Sunday felt pretty confident that she would not fail to keep the rendezvous she had given him, and though he hardly expected her before a comparatively late hour, there was far too much at stake for him to risk possible miscarriage by himself being late on the spot.

For this reason the partners were so early astir, and this was why Solemn Saul skirmished around to gain an early breakfast. Both he and Dandy Dutch were devout believers in the saying that a full stomach winneth many a tough battle.

Dandy Dutch took up his favorite position on the front veranda, lazily enjoying his cigar, and after a little byplay for the benefit of such ears as might be curious enough to listen, the Decorator bade his valet begone, for he was unbearably stupid that morning.

"Sufferin' grandpap to thunder an' guns!" groaned Solemn Saul, his little eyes rolling upward, his gaunt visage the battle-ground of despair and indignation. "Good Lawd! Kin I stagger up under it much longer? Kin I—shell I—must I?"

"Lend him a bat over the head with your club," maliciously suggested the clerk, who alone caught a portion of that heartsick soliloquy; but Solemn Saul fairly turned green with horror at the idea, and fairly bolted from the spot.

"It's a wearing work," he grimly mused, as he left the hotel rapidly behind him, heading for the corner of the street designated by Fanny Black as their place of meeting. "It's mighty trying on the constitution, I'm beginning to discover, even this early; but business is business, and the end ought to justify the means. If we get there with both feet, the Sad Man isn't going to grumble out loud."

Saul Sunday had ample time in which to con well the role he had chosen before that rendezvous was kept, for Fanny was late in keeping her appointment, and he had to do considerable tramping here and there to guard against arousing the curiosity and suspicion of such citizens as crossed his path during those weary hours.

It was pretty well along toward noon, when he first caught sight of his "sweetness" approaching the corner, and he drew a long sigh of relief as he recognized that tall, graceful figure, despite the long linen ulster by which its outlines were disguised.

"Brace up, old man!" he muttered, something like admiration leaping into his keen eyes as he saw how suddenly and perfectly the maid managed to disguise herself directly she saw her lover had recognized her figure. "She's a daisy—of one sort! How's that for a woman over head and ears in love with a symphony in jet and gold?"

From tall, Fanny Black became short, from erect she grew crooked, and in place of her quick, elastic tread, she seemed to shuffle as she walked, with the addition of a very natural limp.

"Good Lawd!" gasped Solemn Saul, as the lovers came together on the corner, his gaunt visage the picture of amazed sorrow and apprehension. "You didn't ketch the rheumatics, honey dove, o'—"

"S-s-s-t!" uttered the maid, casting a swift glance around them, as though she feared being spied upon, then resuming her natural action for a space, as though to lend her laughing explanation more credit. "No, you dear, silly goose, but if anybody should see me here with you, it might come to the ears of my mistress. And then—she'd never forgive me for joinin' in the plot against her peace of mind."

Solemn Saul gave a breath of relief that almost equaled a groan, and sought to fling an arm about that trim waist. But Fanny seemed far more coy now that the sun was shining upon them, and deftly eluded his grasp, springing back and shaking a warning finger before his face.

"How dare you, Saul?" with a frown that was scarcely less tempting than her smiles, it was so evidently assumed for the occasion. "In broad daylight, and right where all the town can see you?"

"Town to thunder, jest so it leaves me you, an'—Honey dove?"

"Well, silly?"

"Jest one—jest a weenty, teenty bit o' one! Ef you only knowed how monstrous hungry fer honey dew I'm gittin' this holy minnit—an' me waitin', an' watchin', an' hopin', an' fearin', an' never knowin' but you was playin' roots onto me, ever sence the light begin to come crawlin' up over them rocks in the yeast! Ef you only knowed all this, jest as I'm tellin' of ye now, wouldn't you, *couldn't* you let me have jest one?"

But Fanny was obdurate, and shrunk away when he tried to take what he so humbly begged.

"You don't know how sharp some eyes are, just when they ought to be better employed, Saul," she murmured, with a frightened glance around them. "And though I might pass unnoticed, thanks to this hideous old ulster, I'm afraid they'd recognize that lovely suit of yours!"

"Ef I ever wear it ag'in, hope may— Fanny, dove?"

"Well, Saul, dear?"

"Ef I was to skoot back to the hotel an' steal a rig o' the best the boss is got, don't you reckon?"

"You'd hardly find me here on your return," a little impatiently interposed the maid. "I can stay but a minute, and unless you've forgotten all you wanted me to learn last night—"

"Jest as ef I could ever forget!" echoed the love-lorn valet, his eyes rolling upward in ecstasy at the mere memory thus invoked. "When I never slep' a wink fer thinkin'— when I could smack the two lips o' me an' hear the honey-bees buzzin' ail through the hotel lookin' fer the clover-patch— Fanny?"

"What is it now?" with just a shade of tartness in her voice.

"Let the boss an' the mistress go to thunder, an' we two go hunt up a dominie fer to ax him— Why not?"

"Glory Ann—isn't that sufficient?"

Solemn Saul "wilted" immediately, and if there was something very like an oath mingling with his groan, can any true lover blame him?

"When you can come to me with those words, a free and honest suitor, Saul, I'll answer you without evasion, but until that day comes, I am compelled in self-defense to hold you aloof," was the grave, yet tremulous decision. "And now—were you in earnest last night when you spoke of your master being so eager to form the acquaintance of my mistress?"

"Was I?" echoed Saul, brightening up wonderfully, considering the serious rebuff so recently received. "So much so that I can't jestly begin to tell how much. An' the boss? Waal, little lady, he's so hard hit that them as helps him git even one word in edgeways with the ma'am, couldn't set tha'r price too high. He'd jest kiver 'em a foot deep with gold chips, ef they said they wanted it that way."

Fanny made no immediate remark, though this enthusiastic speech seemed to make an impression upon her. She walked slowly beside the gorgeously-arrayed valet, her head bent, her face fairly well concealed by her veil.

"Money wouldn't be good enough fer 'em!" added Solemn Saul, by way of a clincher.

"It isn't the money so much, though that comes handy to have about the house!" with a short little laugh, her dark eyes flashing a look up into his face that caused him to catch his breath with a gasp.

"Our house, Fanny?"

"If all goes well— Behave yourself, sir, or I'll leave you to guess all the rest."

"Sufferin' grandpap! ef it was only come night ag'in!" groaned this modern Tantalus, scowling through his misery at the bright sun.

Fanny faced him sharply, her face growing hard and impatient, her voice warning him not to cross her too far, just then, unless he wished to defeat his own hopes.

"Are you trying to drive me away, with my message untold? If not, try to restrain your impatience and listen to what I have to say. Time is pressing, and if I linger much longer, my mistress will suspect something of the truth."

"I'm muzzled, Miss Black," meekly uttered the valet.

"I had no chance to deliver your note last night, but I dropped it in my mistress's way this morning. She read it; of that I am positive, though she never once mentioned the matter, and of course I dared not make any allusion to it."

"Then it didn't skeer her very much," ventured Solemn Saul.

"I may yet hear from it," with a little shiver. "Long as I have served her, my mistress is still an enigma to me; but never mind that. You asked me, and I could not refuse your prayer, Saul."

"They ain't nobody lookin', Fanny!" pleaded Sunday.

"And I have no more time to spare, Saul. I may be missed at any moment, and I almost believe La Masque would murder me without a scruple if she so much as suspected me of plotting against her in favor of a stranger."

"So much the more reason fer gittin' her an' the boss to hitch," grimly nodded the valet. "Fer ef he can't tame her by kisses, I reckon he kin by other means. Anyway, he jest needs to squint at me once fer to make the cold trimmles run races all up an' down my back!"

Fanny frowned impatiently at this discursion, but lest another reproof should delay her still longer, she permitted the speech to pass.

"I hardly dared ask La Masque any questions after having placed that note in her way, as you may guess, but in the end I learned all you wished me to discover. My mistress intends to

ride to-day, as usual. She will not start out much before noon, if any, but when she does go, it will be to follow the road leading to the Eagle's Nest."

"They ain't any sign-boards on that trail, I don't reckon?" feebly ventured Sunday, tugging at his goat-like beard. "Ef we was older citizens o' Prospect, it mebbe'd be different, but the way it is ef the boss ain't no smarter then I be, the lady mought ride clean thar an' back ag'in long afore we got fairly set to goin'!"

"Eagle's Nest lies due south of town, and your master could hardly go astray if he tried," quickly returned the lady's maid. "If he comes to a place where he feels at a loss, let him watch for a lady in dark green, riding a black horse. If you carry this information straight, I don't see how he can possibly go astray."

"Word fer word he shell hev it, honey dove, but I can't tell it in that same sweet voice—not ef I was to try double times over."

"Then make use of your own voice, silly," laughed Fanny, seemingly greatly relieved at having finally delivered her information. "If you can find time, Saul, come this evening to let me know how he prospers."

"You ain't goin' to run off an' never— Jest one, Fanny!"

"What would Glory Ann say?" mocked the maid as she deftly evaded his grasp, beating a rapid retreat.

CHAPTER XXII.

DANDY DUTCH ACCEPTS THE BAIT.

SOLEMN SAUL made no move to check her hasty flight, or to follow after her, standing with bowed shoulders, his face the image of melancholy despair. And he was occupying the same position when Fanny Black turned to look back for an instant before rounding the corner on her way back to her mistress.

"She's a keen one, or I'm 'way off!" the detective muttered to himself as he turned to seek his partner. "I'd give a snug little sum to know just what the woman is thinking, this minute! Dollars to cents she's laughing in her sleeve at the smart manner in which she's fooled the trickster!"

Despite himself Solemn Saul was ill at ease, and more than once during that short trip back to the hotel, he caught himself wishing he had succeeded less completely.

"If I could make Dandy look at it with my eyes, I wouldn't care so much. He'd be more on his guard. Now—for little I'd shut down on his keeping this appointment—for that's just what it amounts to, Fanny or no Fanny!"

Nothing of these doubts showed in his face when Solemn Saul came in sight of the Occidental. He was once more the meekly sad valet, and with humbled head he stood and bore the languid abuse showered upon him by his master.

"Drunk again, you hypocritical sponge! And I've been waiting this hour past to learn whether I'll go riding or turn in again to sleep the day to an end. Saul Sunday!"

"Yes, sir, boss, your Honor!"

"You're an infernal fraud!"

The valet meekly groaned assent to this languidly vehement summing up of his character, instinctively dodging as Dandy Dutch flung the stump of a cigar at his head and rose to his feet.

"Show me the way to my room, you rascal."

"Sufferin' grandpap!" sighed Saul, reproachfully glancing over the laughing faces of the guests. "Time was—"

"And you'll hear it begin to strike in just a second if you don't begin picking up those delicate hoofs of yours, Sunday," yawned the Decorator, lazily.

Sadly subdued, the valet led the way into the hotel and up to the chamber sacred to the eccentric sport from the upper country. But the instant the door closed behind them, both men changed to their natural characters.

"Lucky or a fizzle, pard?" asked Deutsch.

"I met the girl, and she told me her mistress would go out riding as usual. She'll take the Eagle Nest trail, wearing a dark green habit and riding a black horse. May not start much before noon."

"Multum in parvo!" nodded Dandy approvingly as he glanced at his watch.

"Isn't it just a little too much, old fellow?" slowly asked Saul Sunday, his face grave and his eyes showing the troubled brain behind them.

"We don't often find matters all coming our way, just as we want them. To me, it looks more suspicious than salubrious—heap sight!"

"You think it's a trap set for me, not for the woman?"

"Don't it begin to bear the same appearance to you?" was the counter question. "The girl said she dropped that note where La Masque found and read it. She said her mistress told her she would ride as usual, and even named the course she would take."

"Natural enough, surely," with a nod.

"Granted, if La Masque is really the woman she claims to be. But if she is, then you are left. If she isn't—if she is Silky Steele—then a chance like this can only cover a deadly trap!"

"Which horn of the dilemma do you think it, pard?"

"I begin to believe La Masque is really La

Masque. I think she is an ally or partner of Captain Vampire, instead of being the original Simon. And I believe that if you follow her to-day, you'll run up against a snag in the shape of a gang of road-agents before you see town."

And I feel dead sure that La Masque is Silky Steele," grimly retorted Deutsch, beginning to change his garments for others more suitable for the saddle. "So sure am I that I'll risk my share of the profits on my judgment. And if it's in the wood at all, I'll know the whole truth before the sun sets this evening. All I ask is one glimpse at La Masque's left cheek. She would hardly wear her mask in the daytime, but if she does, I'll manage to get under it, somehow!"

Saul Sunday said no more, though his brows were clouded still. He knew that argument would do no good, and though he might command, he was averse to taking such a decided step, under the circumstances.

"Hadrn't you better go order my horse, Sunday?" smiled Deutsch. "I can't afford to miss a chance, and women are proverbially uncertain. It is barely possible that La Masque may alter her mind about waiting until noon before setting sail for Eagle's Nest."

Without a word further, Saul Sunday left the chamber and hastened to the livery stable, only a short distance around the corner, where the horses on which they had entered Prospect were stabled. In his character of the Sad Man, he delivered his orders, and dolefully waited for the steed to be prepared for the road, then leading the animal back to the hotel, standing in meek silence while the few guests still lingering on the veranda gazed at their hearts' content.

They were thus engaged when Dandy Dutch came down from his chamber, neatly yet richly attired for the road. He caught some of those jests, and his darkly handsome face took on a cold severity as he said:

"Gentlemen, you are laboring under a slight misapprehension. Saul Sunday is my valet. I pay for the privilege of cursing him. I give him wages for permitting me to turn him into a laughing stock, but that lends you no license for attempting to make him the butt for your arrows of wit. So—I humbly beg of you to make a note of it for the future, gentlemen!—you are infringing on my patent. And after this, the man who insults my servant, insults me!"

Without pausing for a reply to this polite intimation that for the future it must be "hands off" under penalty, Dandy Dutch leaped lightly into the saddle, giving Solemn Saul a playful touch across the shoulders with his gold-handled riding-whip then trotting off at a fair rate of speed.

His face was turned toward the south, and despite the lament of Solemn Saul over their slight acquaintance with the surrounding country, Dandy Dutch showed no hesitation nor any inclination to ask his way of any of the citizens whom he passed by.

The town was quickly left behind him, and Dandy Dutch rose in his stirrups as he gained the top of a slight ridge, gazing keenly in advance, looking for the green habit and black horse, but without sighting it. Not that he really believed La Masque could have gotten ahead of him, but it was a rule of his to neglect no precautions.

"It's only right that an ardent lover should be earliest at the rendezvous," he nodded, setting forward once more, a curious smile lighting up his face at some inward thoughts. "And La Masque, if she does come this way, shall have as little to complain of as her maid, so far as outward warmth goes!"

He laughed aloud as his good horse broke into an easy, swinging gallop that carried him rapidly forward, and none of the doubt and anxiety which Saul Sunday had betrayed could be seen in his face.

Yet he believed that he was riding to encounter one who would almost certainly know him for what he was: a professional hunter of men, a detective, doubtless with a warrant ready for execution.

"What will Prospect and her gallant sports think if my guess should prove true?" he mused, his eyes twinkling with grim humor at the bare idea. "What will they say if I bring La Masque back with me in steel bracelets? And when they see what has so long and so jealously been hidden beneath that velvet mask—it's too good to realize!"

Once more his clear, musical laugh rung out, for now he was riding through a lonely tract of ground, where there was no possibility of his unusual merriment awaking curiosity.

Presently he sobered down, his head bent a little like one buried in deep thought. He was trying to settle on the best course for his action in case La Masque should indeed keep that rendezvous.

It took nearly an hour to carry him to the vicinity of Eagle's Nest, and then he concealed himself on high ground where he could see for miles along the way he had come, drawing a pair of field-glasses from his saddle-bags and sweeping the country round about his covert.

Thus he spent something more than an hour without making any discovery of moment, but

at the end of that period his glasses became fixed at a slowly moving point on the trail toward Prospect.

"A lady, and riding this way?" he muttered, grimly smiling. "La Masque, almost as a matter of course!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

BEAUTY BROUGHT TO BAY.

THE distance was considerable, but his glass was good and his eyes well accustomed to its use.

"A dark horse, and habit to match, green or otherwise," he muttered as he kept the glass on the rider. "She rides like one on business bent, rather than for simple pleasure. Well, I reckon it is business!"

He uttered the words with a low, hard laugh that spoke very little of love or other soft nonsense. Now that he was alone, safe from observation, the self-styled "Decorator" wore a look very different from the languid, half-bored expression which he had already made quite familiar to the Prospect sports.

"A loose rein, but not in too big a hurry to overrun the trail," he laughed, after another brief silence, keeping the object of his interest well focused as the distance grew less.

Thanks to the aid of the powerful lens he could note every movement, almost every look cast to either side of the wild trail by the approaching rider. These were many, and at times La Masque, as he decided the rider must be, drew her horse down to a slow walk as she rose to her full height in the saddle to scan the ground on either side of the road, at points where it was possible for one not familiar with the lay of the ground to wander from the direct line for Eagle's Nest.

"Sunday would croak worse than ever should he see as much!" grimly laughed Dandy Dutch as he closed his glasses, no longer feeling their assistance necessary. "He'd swear that La Masque was running a trap, not me. And I'm not so mighty sure but what he'd be right, too!"

Not more than half a mile of space divided the twain, now, and the detective deemed it wisest to cover himself a little more securely. He backed down from his prominent lookout, seeking a denser clump of shrubbery where he could still watch the fair rider and yet be safe from discovery so far as her searching glances were concerned.

La Masque was no longer urging her horse along at speed, and it was with very unlovely-like criticism that Dandy Dutch followed her every motion from his place of espial.

"She's out for conquest, sure!" he nodded as he noted that perfectly fitting habit of rich cloth with its tracing of gold embroidery, the turban with its yellow-tipped feather, held by a clasp that glowed and sparkled as the rays of the sun fell across it, the embroidered gauntlets and the gold-headed whip. "I'd give a penny to know whether it's gudgeon or shark she thinks to land!"

When almost directly opposite the point where Dandy Deutsch lay under cover, La Masque drew rein and came to a halt, lifting the neat pair of field-glasses from where they rested at her pommel, sweeping the trail behind her rod by rod, then turning the instrument to again scan the more prominent points on either side of the road.

Dandy Dutch strained his ears in hopes of catching an incautious phrase or ejaculation that might add to his advantage, but if any such passed those lips, it was too guarded for his senses. And as her face turned almost directly toward him, his teeth met with a vicious click.

La Masque wore a thick veil, as though to protect her complexion from the noonday sun, but he had noticed her flinging this back for the purpose of using her glasses more accurately. As her gaze gradually veered his way, he counted on catching at least a partial glimpse of her face. Now he saw that the fair rider still wore her velvet mask.

"More wolf than lamb there!" he mentally decided, lying under cover without so much as stirring a muscle save those employed in drawing his breath.

Anxious as he was to have an interview with this faro queen, Dandy wanted to take his own time for managing that introduction. And little as he cared, sentimentally speaking, for the favor of this lady, he flushed a trifle at the mere idea of being discovered while playing the spy.

La Masque did not pause long, though her search was thorough as the nature of the ground would permit. Still holding the glasses in her whip hand, she gave the black horse free rein and moved along the rocky trail, vanishing from sight.

"Still the What-is-it?" muttered Dandy Dutch, when his keen ears could barely catch the receding hoof-strokes, rising from his covert and picking his way to the little hollow in which he had concealed his horse. "La Masque, plain enough, but what lies behind? Simply an adventuress, jumping at the chance of hooking a gudgeon, or—Silky Steele?"

There was only one method of solving his doubts, and leaping into the saddle, the detec-

tive picked his way back to the trail, then sent his good horse forward at a rapid trot, rising in his stirrups to catch sight of the masked enigma in advance.

This was not long delayed, and apparently at the same time La Masque caught the sound of his coming, for she was casting a glance back over her shoulder, and then her horse darted forward at a gallop.

"If trap it is, trap it must be!" muttered Dandy, touching his good steed with the spurs at his heels, and measuring his pace by that of the rider in advance.

He was not quite ready to bring matters down to a simple test of speed. Time enough for that should La Masque actually try to run away from the horseman on her track.

"Risky, maybe, and Sunday would kick hard at the bare idea of letting her pick her own battleground, but I'm running this end of the firm, just at present. If into the ground, I pay the costs!"

That elevated stretch passed, the trail ran with tolerable directness between two high ridges for a mile or more, and a rider could sweep the road from end to end at a glance.

"She'll look back soon if— I knew it!"

La Masque turned in her saddle and flashed a look back over the trail, as though the steady clatter of iron-shod hoofs had just come to her ears. She seemed to be in brief doubt, half-checking her steed, but then sending him on more rapidly than ever.

Dandy Dutch flitted a snowy kerchief in the air, but if the signal caught her eye, it was neither answered nor heeded. Straight ahead she dashed, and as he saw the distance growing wider between them, he also touched up his horse, smiling grimly back of his curly beard.

"A genuine love chase! How will it end?"

More abruptly and after a fashion for which he was hardly prepared, keen though his wits were, and for once in his life the detective found himself taken unawares.

La Masque had vanished around the abrupt curve in the trail, if anything pressing her horse to greater speed, and he followed with free rein to jerk up his horse with a little ejaculation of surprise as he caught the clear, stern accents:

"Halt, sir! Give an account of yourself, if you please!"

Almost within arm's length La Masque was sitting on her black steed, one hand keeping a stiff rein that backed the beast half way into the foliage that screened the rocky wall, the other covering her pursuer with a cocked revolver.

Though taken so completely by surprise, Dandy Dutch was not a man to feel at a loss for any great length of time. A severe touch of the curb checked his horse, and even as the tortured animal reared in the air, its rider doffed his hat and lifted both hands above his curls.

"Hands up and wholly at your mercy, Madame La Masque!" he cried, blandly smiling straight into that leveled tube.

"Ha!" with a visible start. "How do you know who I am?"

"How could I mistake, after having once gazed upon that form? Even an infant can pick out the moon from among a million stars."

Bold as that flattery was, it came from his lips with as much innocence as though he were the infant alluded to, and that glittering weapon wavered and sunk from the level of his heart. And taking advantage of the seemingly involuntary act, Dandy Dutch calmly lowered his hands, though still leaving his head uncovered.

"How am I to regard you, sir?" with just a shade of softness in her clear tones. "As friend or foe?"

"Certainly not the last," was his swift response. "If I may dare hope as much—as a friend, dear lady!"

"Then, friend, turn back or pass on and permit me to finish my ride in peace," said La Masque, her voice once more cold and unmoved.

But the Decorator was not to be so easily defeated after all the time and trouble he had spent in the effort to meet this strange woman face to face without the faro-table between them, and instead of meekly yielding to that cold rebuff, he softly uttered:

"Are friends so plentiful that you must drive them back at the pistol muzzle? Have you only enmity to give for friendship?"

La Masque broke into a laugh that sounded hard and bitter, a hand going out with a gesture of angry scorn as she said:

"Friendship? What measure can a woman like me expect at the hands of your sex? I recognize you now, sir. I had the exquisite honor of dealing faro for your benefit last night."

"The honor was all on my side of the board, I assure you, lady."

"Lady?" with a short, bitter laugh and a repetition of that scornful gesture. "That title falls glibly enough from your lips, Mr. Andre Deutsch! But—if you really classed me among true ladies, would you have sent me that insolent note? Would you have dared follow and waylay me as you have this day done? No, a thousand times no! For all true ladies have some one to protect them against insolence, and

a hawk of your feather is but a craven after all!"

Dandy Dutch bowed his head in silence through this fierce outburst, the picture of humiliation and meekness. And had he not taken the precaution to watch the movements of the speaker so long, he might have ended by believing her in bitter earnest.

"May I defend my actions, lady?" he asked, lifting his head and frankly, steadily gazing into the flashing orbs to be seen through the twin apertures in that velvet covering.

"If you have any defense for your conduct, sir, the surest and simplest method of delivering it is to turn back and permit me to go my way without further annoyance."

"I never knew a lady who was not innately cruel, and never more so than to the man who most adored and honored her," quietly said the Decorator, yet with a thinly veiled fire back of his composure. "I hoped you might prove an exception to—"

"And hence a lady only in guise?" bitterly interposed La Masque.

Dandy Dutch abruptly changed his course of attack, no longer sitting humbly before the woman who flung such sharp words in his face, but boldly facing her, his face flushed, his dark eyes glowing vividly, his tones clear and bold.

"You have no right to put such words into my mouth, La Masque, but since you have done so, I'll take the taste out by speaking frankly and to the point."

"I decline to listen to those words, sir," curtly, as she settled herself in the saddle. "Your horse bars my path. Please make way."

"It is hardly polite to deny a lady, is it?" with a soft laugh. "But you called me a hawk just now, and as a hawk can't listen to reason, so I'll stick by the name until I've cleared my record a trifle."

"You did deal faro for me last night, La Masque, but it was not love of lucre that drew me to the Oasis. I saw you the night before. I saw only your figure and one fleeting glimpse of your eyes. I did not even catch your voice. But it was enough to make me vow to win a word from your lips, if only a curse!"

"Will you give way, sir?" sharply cried La Masque, lifting her revolver from where it had rested upon her lap.

"When I have told you how completely I fell in love with you, lady."

"Then—on your own head be it!" bringing the weapon to a level and pulling trigger as the silver drop covered his heart!

CHAPTER XXIV.

DANDY DUTCH BEGINS TO DOUBT.

THE two horses stood almost touching, that ridden by the detective standing at right angles in front of the other. And as La Masque extended her armed hand, Dandy Dutch could have knocked the weapon up or down by a simple motion of his hand, for those fierce words took long enough to pronounce for him to realize her intentions.

But he made no such attempt, gazing steadily into her eyes, nor flinching an atom even when that hammer fell—with a dull click as the cartridge failed to explode.

A severer test of mortal nerve could hardly have been devised. A man may stand and receive a death-shot without flinching or losing the reckless smile upon his face, but even one so steeled to meet death is almost sure to betray himself by a start when the signal fails to summon his doom. That simple snap is harder to bear than the actual shot.

"Your dealer carries mighty poor stock, La Masque," laughed Dandy Dutch, softly. "Try another shell, or—I can warrant my gun sure fire every time, lady!"

With a swift motion he produced a revolver and held it out, butt first, toward the masked rider.

Instead of taking the weapon, La Masque slightly recoiled, her voice plainly unsteadied as she spoke:

"No—no, put it up, sir! I will not—I was mad!"

"Mad indeed, lady, if you thought you were on the point of killing one who had even the remotest idea of insulting you," his own tones a little less steady than ordinary.

"If you knew—if you could even faintly realize all I have to bear and—"

Her voice broke, and dropping her faithless weapon, La Masque bowed her head and covered her eyes, shivering as with suppressed sobs.

Dandy Dutch flinched from this womanly exhibition, where he had stood unmoved while death seemed to stare him in the face.

This was more than he had counted upon. This looked more like a true woman than anything for which he had prepared himself in advance, and a flush of angry shame came into his face.

It was still there when La Masque abruptly flung back her head, forcing a faint laugh as her eyes met his.

"Never whisper this in the circles where the name of La Masque is known, Mr. Deutsch, unless you are prepared to fight for your reputation as a truth-teller!" she cried, her voice hard

and bitter. "You would surely be branded as a liar. What!" with increased bitterness. "La Masque able to weep? Crocodile tears, every one!"

Dandy Dutch could hardly believe that, just at present. He was beginning to doubt his own acumen, firmly though he had defended it against the judgment of Saul Sunday. And if he could have done so with anything like grace, he would have abandoned the matter right there.

La Masque tossed back her head with a natural or assumed air of recklessness as she spoke again:

"I owe you an apology, Mr. Deutsch, and so—can I offer a better one than by listening to your interrupted confession?"

It was by no means what Dandy Dutch anticipated, and it revived his former suspicions as to the real character of this masked mystery. Perhaps it was just as well, for otherwise he could hardly have carried out his original plans without serious embarrassment.

"You are willing to listen patiently, lady?" he gravely asked.

"Call me Duquoin—Stella Duquoin," La Masque said, her tones softening once more as she added: "That alone should reassure you, Mr. Deutsch, for never another man in all this region ever heard me pronounce that name; that name my sainted mother bestowed upon me!"

"Then it shall be sacred, even from my lips," quickly replied the detective. "At least until I have proven my worthiness to take it upon them. Until then, shall it be La Masque?"

"Perhaps that would be best," with a touch of her former recklessness. "As often as you utter it, the title will remind me of what I am now, at least in the common estimation. La Masque let it be, then!"

"And you will forgive my audacity in sending you that note, begging an interview?"

"Why not? Was it not natural? What else could I expect, filling the station you saw me adorn?" with a hard, reckless laugh.

"You are resolved to punish me, after all," sighed the detective, reining back his horse, and bowing low as though taking his leave. "It is no more than just, perhaps, yet—choose your path, La Masque, and I'll take the opposite direction."

"You really mean it?" her voice softening, woman like. "You will go your way and never try to cross my pathway more?"

"If you say I must, lady," he bowed.

The strange woman sent her horse forward until she could rest a hand on Dandy Dutch's shoulder. She leaned forward in her saddle until she could gaze fairly into his eyes. A faint flush tinged her cheeks, but he met that searching gaze unflinchingly. And then La Masque drew back, turning her steed until she was by his side, saying softly:

"I never thought to be so weak again, but I trust you, Mr. Deutsch. I believe you are what you claim to be; a true friend. We will ride on together, and you may talk as freely as you please. Then—perhaps I may find my tongue, too!"

As her steed moved forward, that ridden by the detective kept pace of its own accord. Andre Deutsch was far too thoroughly befogged to give him the cue, so perhaps it was just as well.

Experienced in all the arts and wiles of criminals though he was, and priding himself on being an acute judge of human nature, the detective felt himself completely puzzled just now.

Up to a very few moments ago, he had felt perfectly confident that the one figuring as La Masque of the Oasis was the game to bag which he had traveled thousands of miles. Now—he doubted everything.

Yet there was a touch of the bulldog in his nature, and even while he felt certain uneasy qualms, he quickly resolved to play his part to an end, and then, should his suspicions prove without foundation, he would humble himself in the dust at her feet, pleading such excuse as the truth could offer.

"Have you never borne another name than that of Stella Duquoin?"

"You forget La Masque," with a laugh—was it a start?

He could not be entirely sure, but the suspicion lent him nerve to go on in the path he had marked out for himself.

"I saw you, as La Masque, for the first time, two nights ago. I happened by chance in the Oasis, for I did not mean to stop long in town. I was attracted by your figure. I managed to catch one look into your eyes, and that glimpse strengthened my suspicions that you and I had met under very different circumstances."

"How can that be?" asked La Masque, in low, uncertain tones.

"If you are indeed the person I fancied, in that moment, you ought to be able to answer that question," gravely added Deutsch. "You ought to remember how we parted, and why."

"Tell me what you mean, please," in still less certain tones.

"I had a friend once. I loved her dearly.

So dearly that I treated her as a precious sister, when I might have made her all my own."

"Few men are so generous—or so cold-blooded," she murmured, but with a touch of scorn in the last words, and a glint in her eyes as they shot a fleeting glance into his grave countenance.

"Not the last, for I loved her as few men can love. Yet I held her at arm's length because there was a barrier between us which could not be crossed with honor."

"She was wedded, perhaps?"

"I was married, rather," with a short nod, his eyes directed straight ahead, seemingly unconscious of her keen, though furtive gaze.

"That barrier has been removed by death, but long before that happened, the friend I loved as a bride and treated as a sister was gone. She fled from me, believing the worst of me that malicious tongues could tell."

"Never to be found again? Or did you take the trouble to search?"

"Ever since I was free to tell her all, I have wandered the world over with that one hope in view. I never found a trace of her until—*did* I find it, two nights ago, La Masque?"

"If you had found her, what would you have said?" slowly asked the woman, her eyes seeming to be backed by living fire.

"Explained the past, and begged her to marry me and live only for the future," was the impetuous response.

"And if she had not felt free to accept? If some wretch had her in his power, through no sin of her own, as a cruel wretch now has me?"

"Tell me his name, La Masque."

"Frank Steele, *alias* Silky Steele. Do you know him, Andre Deutsch?"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE STORY TOLD BY LA MASQUE.

LA MASQUE was watching her companion keenly as she pronounced this name, but Dandy Dutch gave no sign by which her suspicions could fasten, though that man was the last on earth whom he had expected to hear named by those masked lips.

"Never heard of the—is it gentleman or tough?" he asked, his dark eyes calmly encountering those glittering orbs.

La Masque made no immediate response. She threw all her power into that gaze, like one striving to read what might lie deep buried under the surface.

She might as well have tried to read the history of past centuries, written upon the face of the bleak rocks by which their horses were carrying them.

"What matter, so long as I called him my enemy?"

"None. Where can I find him?"

"You would kill him, then?" slowly asked La Masque, a curious quaver in her tones, a strange intentness in her gaze. "You would do this, simply on my declaration that Silky Steele was my bitter enemy?"

"I would do it ten times over for the woman I once treated as a sister. Then why not just once for the woman whose figure, whose eyes, whose voice all so strongly remind me of that lost love?"

If still acting, Dandy Dutch proved himself an adept. His face was pale, with a curious blending of sadness and hope. His tones were firm and even, yet underneath lay a faint tremor that might almost be called the echo of a shadow.

La Masque bent over in her saddle until her gloved hand could drop lightly, almost caressingly upon his arm, and her voice was softer and more musical than any she had called into play before.

"You mean this, Andre Deutsch? You will prove yourself my friend, even though I be not your long-lost love?"

The Decorator from Dead-Lift gave a faint sigh, flinging back his head like one casting aside a dearly cherished hope. Then he squarely met the gaze of his enigmatical companion for a few moments before speaking out.

"Put me to the test, La Masque, and if I don't come up to your expectations, be sure it'll not be through lack of good will. This enemy of yours—Silken Steel, you said?"

"Silky Steele. Surely you have heard of him?"

"Never before his name passed your lips, to my knowledge," was the unblushing response. "I'll know him better, though, if you direct me how and where to find the gentleman."

La Masque turned her eyes ahead, riding for some little distance before making any reply to this quiet speech. Dandy Dutch seemed quite content that she should take all the time she required, for he himself would feel all the safer for a time of cool, keen reflection.

Up to this very hour, he had felt confident that the being posing as La Masque was none other than the notorious criminal Silky Steele himself! He had staked his reputation upon it, and had begun to play his cards in accordance with that supposition. Now—what was he to think?

That La Masque was proving herself a better actor than the trained detective? That beneath that womanly surface really lay hidden the

criminal whom he had trailed across thousands of miles? Or was she a stranger to crime and to him? Or was she only an ally to the man whom he hunted, sent to lure him into a snare, instead of being trapped?

"I can hardly believe it!" murmured La Masque, so lowly that only the keenest of ears could have made out the words above the sounds of their horses' hoofs on the flinty trail. "Is there so much true manhood left in the world? Can a man so serve a woman, without extorting his reward in advance?"

"Try me, La Masque," quietly interposed Dandy Dutch.

His companion gave a sudden start, turning toward him like one who was, abruptly recalled to the present.

"I did not—I forgot for a moment where I was, Mr. Deutsch," she said, her whip-band rising to rest heavily against her heart.

"And I fancied you were speaking to me," bowed the detective, as he added: "Forgive me, and pray I never heard your soliloquy!"

"And you have fully decided that I am not the lady you loved in the long ago?" ignoring his half ironical speech.

"It's hard to think so while you look at me with those eyes and talk to me with that voice, La Masque," hesitating just a little as he added the words. "If I might beg you to trust me as a friend—if I might pray for just one glimpse of that face, lady!"

La Masque turned abruptly away, touching her horse with the whip and breaking into a trot. Dandy Dutch kept close to her side, measuring his pace by hers, seemingly content to await her pleasure.

La Masque seemed to be a creature of impulse that bright day, for as abruptly as she started, so she checked her horse, wheeling it about until the two horses rubbed noses in silent comradeship.

"I will trust you fully, Andre Deutsch," the woman spoke, her voice a little unsteady, but still that of one who has fully determined her future course. "You shall see my face, since a doubt still lingers, but I warn you that you will be doubly disappointed when the mask is lifted. I am not your long lost love. And I am not so marvelously beautiful that I have to mask my charms in order to—Bah!" with a passionate gesture. "Can I never forget the old stage tricks?"

"That's because you still doubt my sincerity, I fear, La Masque."

"Not so, my friend. If I doubted you, I would not have said as much of myself," came the quick denial. "Nor would I ask you to listen to my reasons for following the life I lead in Prospect."

"If the story is painful to recall, why make the attempt?" earnestly asked the detective. "I'll take your story on trust, and wait to hear all until after I have proved my worthiness by bringing your enemy to book. Only—may I not see the face of my new friend?"

"I ought to refuse, lest the sight dampen your ardor," laughed La Masque, as she deftly sprang from the saddle before the detective could divine her intention. "But a willful woman maun hae her way, ye ken? And after I've told you my past, I'll show you what lies hidden beneath this friendly covering, Andre Deutsch."

Curiously hovering between doubt and certainty, Dandy Dutch made no further effort to hasten that revelation. He dismounted and took charge of La Masque's horse, hastily knotting the bridles together as he saw her sink gracefully upon a grassy knoll hard by, those magnetic eyes watching his movements with half malicious, half-sad intentness.

"Be seated, my friend" La Masque said, as he approached, motioning with her whip to a mossy rock before her. "Unless you are already weary of a woman's whims. Even now, I'm inwardly debating whether or no I had better let this matter go any further."

"May I act as judge?"

"What would be your decision, my good friend?"

"Prove that you are not jeering at me when you use that title!" with sudden earnestness, as he leaned forward and took her hand. "Show that you really consider me a friend."

"To do so I should banish you immediately, for naught but evil can follow those who love—who try to be friends to me."

"I'll risk all punishment, La Masque. Will you put me to the test?"

"I will!" with sudden energy. "I'll tell you. Listen, Andre Deutsch, and try to count up all I owe Frank Steele!"

"I met him for the first time, years ago; never mind where. Never mind just how we became acquainted. Enough that I was gay, careless, happy as the day was long, up to the hour when his fatal beauty came under my eyes: for he was an angel in outward guise, handsome as a demigod, an Apollo in miniature!"

"And you fell in love with him?"

"How could I help it?" with sudden harshness. "But I forget. You say you never met the man."

"I hope to meet him at no distant day, for your sake, La Masque."

"You shall, if woman's wit and woman's ha-

tred can bring it about. But let me tell you, in brief, why I so lust for vengeance.

"I was young, almost friendless, when Frank Steele first came my way. I was clerk in a dry-goods store. I roomed with a girl of about my own age—a fiery, passionate, yet generous Creole. She loved me, I think, even as I loved her, though I could never gain her perfect confidence.

"One evening—shall I ever forget it? One evening Marie suddenly drew a dagger, and drove it repeatedly into her breast, falling dead in my arms as I strove to stay her hand. And while I was holding her thus, the fatal weapon in my hand, just as I had plucked it forth from that last, fatal wound, Frank Steele rushed into the room.

"Can you not guess what followed, my friend? Can you not see how wholly I was at his mercy—the mercy of an utterly heartless villain who lived but to gain his own ends, who now took by force what he had tried to gain through specious arts?"

"Say no more, La Masque," gently spoke Dandy Dutch, one hand touching her arm as he added: "Tell me where I may find this enemy of yours, and he shall pay the full price for all his past sins against you."

"Even though he may be surrounded by men who have taken an oath to avenge his fall if their guard fails to preserve his life?"

"Even then, my friend," was the steady response.

"Even though I should declare him to be Captain Vampire?"

"That he is your enemy is enough for me."

"Then—wait yet a few moments, dear friend," her tones growing more natural as she hurriedly resumed her story. "He swore that unless I would fly with him, I should hang for the death of my room-mate. He vowed that he would take oath he caught me in the act; that I quarreled with and stabbed poor Marie in a jealous quarrel—a dispute over his love, the matchless villain!"

"I was mad, yet stunned. I suffered him to take me away, and it was long weeks afterward when I first learned that I stood charged with having murdered my poor friend. Then—when I begged him to take me back and clear me of that horrible charge, he laughed at me and mocked me.

"I fled from him at the first chance, but that was not until I had time for deliberately weighing my situation. I could not prove my innocence. I dared not make the attempt.

"How I managed to exist during the next two years I can hardly explain. It is still like a hideous dream. But, as Heaven is my judge, Andre Deutsch, no crime or wrong-doing aided me in keeping the wolf from my door!"

"Then Frank Steele again crossed my path. He threatened me with exposure unless I returned to him, as his wife. I defied him at first, but then—I was at the point of starvation, remember—I at length gave way, and we finally brought up at Prospect.

"You can guess the rest, my friend, without many words to aid you in lifting the veil. Silky Steele forced me to serve as La Masque."

"And he—is Captain Vampire?" eagerly asked the detective.

"The road-agent chief—yes!" bowed La Masque. "And now—you are still anxious to gaze upon what lies back of this covering?" tapping the velvet mask with a finger as she leaned toward him.

"More than ever," was the swift response. "And yet—if you are really opposed to grant me such a boon, why—"

"Why should I be?" with a bitter laugh, as she removed her hat, the better to unfasten the mask. "What have I to lose? You have sworn to avenge my wrongs on Captain Vampire and—Merciful heavens!" she shrieked, flinging her arms tightly about the detective, almost throwing him over upon his back. "It's the Vampire himself! Save me—don't let him murder me, dear friend!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

DANDY DUTCH WANTS TO KICK HIMSELF.

A MAN could hardly have been taken at a greater disadvantage than was Dandy Dutch on this occasion.

For the moment he had forgotten his usual precautions, even while feeling morally sure that La Masque was playing a cunning part. Her story was too improbable for belief, and though he was not quite so positive in his conviction that this seeming woman was a man in disguise, he felt morally certain that La Masque was acting as a friend and ally to the criminal he was hunting.

One fair look at her left cheek he knew would settle all further doubts as to her being "Silky Steele," and now that the test lay fairly within his reach, he knelt before La Masque, eager to learn the truth.

And when La Masque uttered that wild cry, flinging herself upon him as though in an excess of fright, his body was bent backward, his legs doubled beneath him, his arms pinned to his side by that frantic embrace.

With all his power he strove to fling La Masque over his head and thus gain a chance

to fight for his life, but before he could accomplish this, a heavy blow deprived him of his senses.

How long this spell of unconsciousness lasted, Dandy Dutch had no means of telling, but it was of sufficient duration to make the ends of his captors certain. For when his eyes opened to stare unsteadily about him, the detective found himself seated on the back of his horse, moving at a walk through the thick-lying rocks and clumps of shrubbery out of sight of the Eagle's Nest trail.

Mechanically he strove to grasp a weapon, as yet only dimly comprehending that he was in danger, but his arms felt like bars of lead, and he had no power over them.

"Don't you act the ass, Dandy Dutch!" came a harsh voice from hard by, then a strong hand was placed on his shoulder and he stared dazedly into the masked face of a tall horseman.

With an instinctive swaying of his body he shook that hand off, but the next instant it closed viciously on his throat, while the horse he was riding came to a halt.

"Will you?" savagely grated the outlaw, closing his muscular fingers until it seemed as though they must fairly meet in the flesh. "It wouldn't take much to make me finish you off for crow-bait, you infernal bloodhound! If you want time to say your prayers and make a will, play docile, my gentle sport from Dead-Lift!"

With a parting pressure that left its marks to linger for days, the athletic outlaw removed his hand, laughing viciously as the captive detective swayed dizzily in the saddle, saved from falling under his horse's feet only by the strong bonds which had been applied during his unconsciousness.

"The time for kicking was before the hobbles were applied, Dandy Dutch! Just now your motto wants to be meek and modest!"

The party moved forward once more, the captive swaying dizzily in the saddle, as his mount picked its way along the tangled trail.

Dandy Dutch said not a word, partly because his tongue seemed hampered quite as effectually as his limbs through weakness and the benumbing effects of that brutal blow from behind, partly because he began dimly to realize that he was hopelessly betrayed.

More than aught else this growing belief served to quicken his brain and bring back his scattered senses.

Ere long he was able to cast intelligent glances around him, though taking care not to make a movement which even his brutal assailant of a while before could distort into an effort at escape. By this means he was gradually posting himself as to the situation.

Nothing very comforting about that.

Though the nature of the trail at that point obliged the party to travel in Indian file, Dandy Dutch managed to make out that his captors numbered not much less than a dozen in all, each one heavily armed and disguised beyond recognition by any person who might chance to take note of their movements.

Over each head was drawn a flour-sack, fitting closely enough to the face to give its wearer an unobstructed vision through the slit running transversely for several inches, yet not following the profile so close as to afford even a hint as to the outlines beneath it.

"Taking notes, my gentle bloodhound?" laughed the athletic figure which he had first seen on recovering his senses in part. "Much good may they do you. But I'm doubting it—bad!"

Dandy Dutch ventured no reply, though his tongue felt more natural than at first, for as yet his captors had not seen fit to gag him.

"Not, mind you, sport," his voice losing something of its harshness as a widening of the trail permitted him to range alongside his captive once more, "that we really want to hurt you more than we are actually obliged to, for I reckon there's a heap more money in you living than dead."

"By which I am to understand?" ventured Deutsch.

"That your treatment depends mainly on yourself. That we roped you to make a stake. That if you act decent, and pay out liberally, you can shortly have the pleasure of telling your mates how gentlemanly the Bats they curse so freely really are."

"Then you are Captain Vampire?"

"Do I fully answer the description given you by La Masque?" the outlaw laughed coarsely.

"Where is she! What have you done with her?"

"Wrapped her up in cotton wool as such a precious jewel deserves, what else?" came the mocking retort, then the tall outlaw fell back to his former position as the trail wound its way through a narrow defile.

Dandy Dutch bowed his head, just then preferring to think rather than talk. And that he had ample food for reflection, may readily be seen.

Of course it had all been a snare, just as Saul Sunday feared, even though he still held to his first belief that La Masque was none other than "Silky Steele" masquerading as one of the opposite sex, either to throw the bloodhounds off the track, or to perfect another bit of rascality

in keeping with the crimes which already marked his evil record.

He was thinking thus when a halt was called and a sack of heavy material was slipped over his head and neck, then firmly bound about his shoulders, effectually blinding him.

"For your own good, Dandy!" chuckled the tall outlaw, whom he now felt morally sure must be none other than Aubrey Conyers, though his tones were so different from the cool, suave voice of the gambler. "Just to guard you against the temptation to bring a company of your pet hounds to inspect our quarters, you know."

Despite this covert warning, Dandy Dutch bent his whole mind to keeping track of each crook and turn in the trail, fixing the position of the sun as he had caught his final glimpse of it; but before half an hour had passed by, he reluctantly gave over the attempt. The turns and changes came so fast and so many in number that even with the full use of his eyes he would have found the task no easy one.

Of course he could place little dependence on that hint at ransom given him by the tall outlaw. If La Masque was indeed Silky Steele, and playing in partnership with his captors, money could not win his freedom though he might offer it in untold sums.

His sole hope lay in the clear wit and iron nerve of his partner, Saul Sunday; but what could one man do against so many?

"I deserve it all, and more too!" was his bitter reflection. "I walked into the snare with all eyes open. I know it was playing with fire, and now my fingers are scorching, I'll grin and bear it as best I know how!"

That journey consumed considerable time, even after Dandy Dutch had been so securely blindfolded, and unless they followed a very roundabout course, he knew that the Bats must have their rendezvous at a considerable distance from Prospect. So much the less hope for him! Even Saul Sunday could scarcely be expected to unravel such a tangled trail.

Dandy Dutch made no attempt to regain the use of his eyes, knowing that he was closely watched, and contented himself with summing up the many errors he had made since first gazing into the dark eyes of La Masque. What if Solemn Saul's pretended love-making should prove equally disastrous?

At length the party came to a halt, and Dandy Dutch was cut loose from the saddle, two men holding his arms and guiding his steps up a winding trail, to enter a cavern, as he knew from the change in the sound of their footsteps. He was bound in a sitting posture to some firm object, then the sack was removed from his head and face.

He could scarcely restrain the cry that leaped to his lips, for only a few yards away La Masque was bound in a similar manner, her face fully exposed to the red glare of the torches, her left cheek toward him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SHADOWING A PARTNER.

"WELL, I wonder! Is it a final let-up, or just stopped for a fresh breath? Hope I may never see San Saba again if I wasn't just on the point of turning tail and about-face for Prospect, to publish the sensational elopement in every paper—good enough!"

Saul Sunday nodded his head emphatically as he saw La Masque slip from her saddle to the ground, and he welcomed the sight as a token that his trailing would be broken at least long enough for a fair breath, even though so considerable a stretch of ground lay between the pair and his present position.

In following the Eagle's Nest trail, the gaunt detective was acting solely on his own responsibility, and without having any complete understanding with his partner, Andre Deutsch.

Indeed, it was not until Dandy Dutch was fairly in the saddle that Solemn Saul concluded to play spy, but the more he dwelt on the too-easily won Fanny Black, the more he doubted the wisdom of Dandy's keeping that semi-appointment.

Partly by following the trail itself, partly by keeping in a generally parallel course, cutting off each bend in the trail when practicable, Sunday had gained a point no great distance from where Dandy Dutch lay in ambush to follow on after La Masque passed him by.

Satisfied that he no longer had occasion to fear detection by either his partner or the woman, Saul Sunday took less precaution to cover his advance, trying his best to keep within trailing distance of the twain.

It was while cutting off a portion of the bend around the first corner of which La Masque lay in wait for her pursuer, as already detailed, that the friendly spy met his most serious obstacle. He found his further progress cut off by an impassable gulch, the extent of which he had no means of ascertaining.

After a hasty debate in his own mind, Solemn Saul turned back to be on the safe side. He knew that the regular trail could be followed, and much as this move would throw him behind his friend, to try and round the gulch at the other end might prove still worse.

He made all the haste practicable, but when once more near the trail, he could see nothing

of his partner and the dangerous game he was pursuing. They might have met and reached an amicable understanding, but the chances were that they had pressed still further ahead, and Solemn Saul chose this alternative, making a goodly race of it, to in the end seek an elevated perch from whence he hoped to sight his quarry.

He made the discovery, as intimated, and feeling pretty sure from the action of La Masque that she intended no further flight, he lay under the scraggy bush that crowned the rise, panting heavily.

He no longer wore the gorgeous livery of black and yellow, and though of course his gaunt features remained the same, few who had noticed the Decorator's valet in Prospect would have recognized him in this sober, rough-clad mountaineer.

"Now's the time you want to keep your two eyes peeled, pard!" muttered the spy, his own gaze passing slowly, keenly, searchingly over the spot where La Masque had come to a pause. "Maybe I'm 'way off. Maybe she's woman enough to grant more kisses than bites. Maybe she's just playing for a sucker with gilt scales and jeweled fins, but I'm doubting it mightily!"

Nevertheless his closest scrutiny failed to detect a single suspicious item to that scene. If others were near, they kept close cover and never showed themselves, until—

"Ware hawks, pard!" cried Solemn Saul, springing to his feet, revolvers flashing into his hands as he saw a tall figure rise from the bushes directly behind his partner.

He saw La Masque fling herself bodily upon Dandy Dutch, forcing the kneeling detective backward, to sink like one dead beneath the blow that third figure so swiftly dealt. Saw all this, and uttered a fierce groan at his own helplessness.

Nearly half a mile divided him from that spot, and of course his firearms were useless. His voice could have covered the space, but even as he thought of trying that as an alarm, he saw other dark figures issue from the bushes and surround the pair, detective and decoy, as he now firmly believed.

After those first moments of savage fury, Saul Sunday regained his natural nerve, and leaving his covert ran swiftly toward the scene, keeping under shelter the while.

"They'll take him alive, or powder would have burnt at the start," he decided. "If they linger long enough for me to get within range, powder will burn, sure!"

It was not until fully half the intervening distance was covered that Solemn Saul got a chance for another look. When that chance came, he was barely in time to catch a glimpse of his partner being carried away by the road-agents, riding his own horse, though a tall rascal was lending him support as they passed out of sight through the rocks and shrubbery.

He saw nothing of La Masque, and halted for a little while lest she might stumble upon him if returning direct to Prospect.

"Tit for tat if so, my lady!" he grated, viciously, crouching under cover and using both eyes and ears the while. "I'll take you—dead or alive! And I'm not so particular just which!"

But La Masque did not come, and fearing to linger longer, lest he lose track of his friend, Solemn Saul crossed the trail and cut across to intercept the retreat of the Bats with their prize.

Once again the natural obstacles foiled his hopes, and when he succeeded in gaining a point which commanded the narrow trail taken by the outlaws, they had passed beyond pistol-shot.

"Cut and come again, then," Sunday doggedly muttered, tightening his belt and preparing for a long and trying race. "As long as you keep to the hills you can't give me the clean shake, and I'll run you for it until the night shuts down, anyway!"

So long as the daylight should hold out, he knew that the outlaws could hardly escape his sight for good, and as time went on, and he saw that Dandy Dutch was able to sit erect and ride without assistance, he began to wonder if, after all, everything wasn't turning out for the best?

"Don't that look like it?" he grimly laughed, watching the manner in which his partner was being blindfolded. "Don't that smack of a den somewhere hard by? Dollars to cents, Captain Vampire, that I'll know when and where to put my finger on you and yours after this night!"

From what he had seen thus far, Solemn Saul felt fairly well assured that Dandy Dutch had no immediate prospect of being put to death by his captors, and though he now lay almost within revolver range, and might have lessened the distance while the outlaws were blinding his partner, he made no such attempt.

"It'll pay better to run 'em down, I reckon," he grimly decided, once more trailing the enemy as they took up their advance. "Dandy's all right. Captain Vampire, La Masque or Silky Steele, it's to be pinching before croaking. And—who knows? the little joker may turn up just when it's least expected!"

At odd times Saul Sunday would lose sight of the outlaws for a few minutes, thanks to the nature of the ground over which he was forced

to dog them. At times he was forced to linger until their winding course carried them out of sight before he dared venture forward, lest wandering eyes catch sight of his figure among the gray rocks, thus foiling his double hopes. But as often he again struck the scent, following it as surely as though the bloodhound to which Captain Vampire had likened Dandy Dutch.

His hopes were delayed much longer than he had anticipated when he saw his partner being blindfolded, and it was almost sunset before the Bats showed signs of actually nearing their destination.

Solemn Saul made the best possible use of his eyes as he saw the outlaws draw rein and come to a halt, near the base of a fairly precipitous hill, the face of which was well lined with stunted trees and clustering vines.

He saw Dandy Dutch cut loose from the saddle and placed upon his feet, with a hooded desperado attending him on either side. He saw them make their way up the hillside, and carefully noted each crook and turn in the trail, gazing long and steadily at the point where they finally disappeared from his sight, making sure that this was the entrance to a cave of some sort, since the minutes passed by without aught further being seen of them.

At the same time he took notice of the main party, seeing that they had no intention of following with their horses, half their number keeping their saddles and each leading a second animal, passing around the base of the steep hill, quickly vanishing from his sight amidst the trees and rocks.

The other outlaws showed no particular haste in seeking the retreat into which Dandy Dutch had been taken, and when they did begin scaling the hill, the tall fellow whom Sunday had decided must be the one in command, remained behind in company with another, his equal in height, but more slenderly built.

Then the chief mounted the path, while the other outlaw moved lazily down the defile until at a point from whence a more extended view could be gained, squatting himself on a shelf of rock some few yards above the level of the pass, striking a match to light a pipe.

His actions were those of one who knows a tedious spell of watching lies before him, but which he considers is little more than a matter of form.

"Maybe not, my dear fellow," grimly muttered Solemn Saul, noting his movements and utilizing the last lingering rays of light to mark out the easiest and surest method of approaching that position. "You play watchdog, and I'll play you!"

It was yet too light to make the perilous venture on which he had already decided, and Solemn Saul improved his opportunities to the best advantage, keeping well under cover and taking notes.

He saw the men return who had ridden away with the extra horses, and mount the hill to vanish at the point where he had already located the secret entrance to the Bats' Den. None of them returned, and he concluded that there was to be no further flitting for the night.

As soon as he deemed the gloom was deep enough to cover his movements, Solemn Saul set about carrying out the scheme which he had roughly blocked out in his mind while lying in wait.

He retreated until he felt that he could cross the pass without danger of being discovered by the man on guard, then gained the other hill, crawling along, guided by the different points which he had memorized while waiting. And in half an hour after beginning that crawl, he caught the scent of tobacco smoke curling up from the little ledge of rock where the sentinel had taken his stand.

To guard against possible accidents, Sunday removed his pistols, placing them where they might be easily recovered, then selected a round, heavy stone which fitted well in the hollow of his left hand.

Edging closer to the rock, he peered over, to almost immediately discover his intended victim, the fitful glow of the freshly filled pipe guiding his gaze. This showed a little to one side, and in order to make his leap as effective as possible, the detective had to shift his position slightly.

This was done without disturbing the outlaw on the shelf below, and preparing himself for the shock, Solemn Saul dropped over the edge, alighting safely beside the fellow, flinging an arm about his neck and dealing him a sharp blow on the head with the stone.

Only a gasping groan, then the outlaw lay at his mercy!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SOLEMN SAUL TALKS SPANISH.

INSTANTLY dropping the stone, the detective twisted his enemy over until he lay on the broad of the back. One hand clutched his throat, the other pressed across his lips, while a knee was planted upon his chest. Even if that blow had been less accurately delivered, the outlaw could not possibly have given an alarm loud enough to reach the ears of his fellows in the Den on the hillside.

But there was no effort on his part to cry

aloud, after that one spasmodic sound. And as he felt the man lying motionless beneath him, Solemn Saul began to fear he had overreached himself.

"Not a bit of it, good luck!" he muttered, after a hasty examination of his prize. "Knocked silly, but worth a dozen dead men!"

Satisfied on this point, the detective fell to work with deft rapidity, first binding the fellow's hands behind his back, and holding a stout gag in readiness to be applied with the first sign of recovering consciousness.

This was not long delayed, and Sunday quickly inserted the gag, knotting it securely behind the fellow's neck, then harshly saying:

"You're my meat, critter! I'd rather take ye on the hoof, but ef you're too big a fool to hear to reason, I'll strip your pelt right as ye lay! Which shall it be?"

Of course there could be no answer in words, but a muffled groan and the shivering below his hands told Saul that his words had cowed the still bewildered wretch.

"I'm reg'lar ole pie ef everythin' comes my way, critter, but I'm sprinkled all over 'ith assnick an' strychnine when anybody crosses me crooked. You lay right hyar an' play lamb ef you want to see any light come ag'in. Kick ef you're feelin' chilly enough to want a hot berth below!"

He quickly scaled the rock and regained his pistols, then dropped once more to the shelf where his captive lay shiveringly awaiting his fate. Lifting him to a sitting posture, Sunday grimly added:

"I'm goin' to ax ye will ye walk out o' this quiet, pardner, an' ef you know how much easier a critter kin breathe with a hull ruff on the top o' his cabeza, you'll say fer sart'in! Git up on your hoofs, pard!"

His strong arm lent the captive strength for this, and then, aiding his unsteady steps, the detective managed to march the outlaw down the pass until at a point where the other slope could be climbed without much difficulty. He paused only when in a covert from whence he could keep watch on the hill where lay hidden the Den of the Bats, and cutting the broad leather belt worn by the fellow, he bound his feet together, using the other portion to fasten his bound hands to a stout bush.

"Now, critter," squatting in front of the prisoner, playing carelessly with his long-bladed knife the while, "I'm goin' to talk Spanish to ye: Spanish, with a might strong United States accent, mind ye!"

"You're tryin' to figger out who I be, but that ain't your business jest now. The matter o' this leetle lesson is heap more interestin' to me then anythin' that I already knows heap plenty well enough.

"You're one o' Captain Wampire's gang o' Bats. Stiddy!" as he held the weapon so its keen point pricked the skin beneath the captive's chin, cutting short his start of mingled rage and fear. "I'm a butcher by trade, an' you wouldn't be the fu't mooley bull I've skun alive. Fer the present I'll do all the talkin' an' sech.

"Now I'm goin' to ax you a mighty heap o' questions, an' they'll be a right smart sprinklin' 'mongst 'em, which I kin answer mebbe better then you know how to tell me. Ef you try to lie, an' happen to hit on any one o' them—good-by, John! I'll salt you down fer pickled pork an' winter eatin'! Sabe, John?"

With this warning, Solemn Saul removed the gag, giving his captive full use of his tongue, but holding his ugly weapon ready for instant use, in case the fellow should attempt to alarm his mates by an outcry.

"Fu't an' fo'most, pardner, who is this Cap'n Wampire o' yours?"

"I don't know, boss," huskily mumbled the outlaw, shivering with fear. "He's more'n one, or else he kin change his bigness as he likes. An' I never see him with his face clean. Ef it ain't masked, it's kivered with a big baird, black one time, light 'nother time, an' gray the next, most like. Ef it ain't that way, then it's blacked an' painted ontel his own mother wouldn't know him!"

"Is they any secret 'bout gittin' inside o' the Den up yender? Any critter keepin' watch as a reg'lar thing? Any passwords an' sech? Keerful, Johnny, fer I'm layin' fer ye!"

The prisoner answered at further length than need be taken up by his answer here, and though he was impatient to get down to more valuable work, Solemn Saul permitted him to talk as he wished, studying his voice, its peculiarities and all, as carefully as possible.

In substance, the outlaw reported that no regular guard was kept at the entrance to the cavern, for it was so secluded that surprise or discovery hardly ever troubled the minds of the Bats. And, of course, each member was well acquainted with the voices and shapes of all the others, so that it would hardly be possible for a stranger to make his way undiscovered among them, even while disguised by the flour sacks.

He added, and to this part Solemn Saul paid particular attention, that the chief had bidden them, one and all, retain their cowl until after their captives were disposed of.

"How many sech hev you got up thar, anyhow, Johnny?"

"Only two. Dandy Dutch, as he calls himself, an' a woman."

"Mebbe you know that woman's name, Johnny?"

"She's the Oasis woman. La Masque, they call her."

"An' you ketched all two both at the same clatter, mebbe?"

The fellow nodded assent, but as that knife flashed before his eyes, he hastened to add:

"True, fer sure, boss! We ketched 'em both in a heap, but the boss sent her 'long 'ith a couple o' boys right to the Den. He tuck the feller by a mighty crooked trail, to mix his idees all up, I reckon."

Solemn Saul drew back a little until the gloom covered his changing countenance, for this was far from being what he had anticipated. Could it be that La Masque was not a traitor, after all? Could it be that Dandy Dutch had hit the truth, in one of his surmises?

Was La Masque really a woman, an adventurer of that class so often to be found in mining-towns, or other places where gambling is carried on without cloak or shame?

Or was she indeed the man for whom he and his partner had come so far, and had that capture been made without the road-agents discovering that the seeming woman was a member of the opposite sex?

Either way, why had the captives been separated as soon as taken?

"Because it's Silky Steele, and they're playing in partnership! Because he wanted to rig up some other trap, and dared not, or could not, arrange it right in company with Dandy!" mentally concluded Saul, dismissing the perplexing matter for future consideration as he once more turned to his trembling prisoner.

"Johnny—I say, what is your name, anyway?"

"Tim Pincher, boss."

"That's the handle your feller Bats knows ye best by, is it?"

"It's the only one I ever hed, boss," with an earnestness which dispelled all doubts on Sunday's side. "We jest don't use any names when we're doin' night work. Then it's pard, or sech like. I'm Tim Pincher, an' all the gang knows me that way."

"They might know a heap uglier gent, Timmy," chuckled Saul, his gaze dwelling on that tall form. "You're a pictur' o' grace, an' ornamental 'nough fer to play bean-pole inside a shirt to dry! An' come to run you over an' sum ye all up, ef you hed a cleaner face onto ye, an' didn't squint quite so bad, an' was more of a dandy sport an' high-roller all to onct—waal, it'd make my honey sweetness rub her pritty peepers twice over to make dead sure it wasn't me!"

"Yes, your Honor," shivered the outlaw, frightened more by this grim jesting than he had been by those savage threats.

"Pity you wasn't as clean an' honest as you is good fer figger, Timotheus," added Solemn Saul, picking up the temporarily discarded gag and motioning his captive to open his jaws for its insertion. "But mebbe when the new hide grows out all over ye, it'll change matters fer the better. While I'm gittin' ready to skin ye, try to hope that much, won't ye?"

He secured the gag, then removed the bonds by which the arms of Pincher were rendered helpless, bidding him slip off his coat and shirt, menacing him with that ugly blade while thus occupied.

"You kin keep yer britches, Timothy, fer them I've got on is pritty much the same color. An' ef you'll shet yer peepers fer a breath or two, I'll let ye see how it feels fer a man to look at his own ghost! Dollars to cents you'd feel like scratchin' 'ny ear ef yours etched!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

SOLEMN SAUL IN A NEW ROLE.

THE gaunt detective slipped off his own outer garments, replacing them by the ones recently worn by Tim Pincher, who was obediently sitting with his eyes closed so tightly that it gave his thin face all the appearance of a badly frost-bitten crab-apple.

Supplementing these by the flour-sack which he had brought with his prisoner, Solemn Saul stood forth a veritable bat in outward semblance, the effect by no means lessened as he skillfully appropriated the voice of his captive as well:

"Critter, ef they's ary mortal disease or the like in your family race an' generation that'd be like fer to disagree with the good health of a Christian Bat when he come to taste the blood o' ye, own up right whar ye be, an' save yerself a mighty heap o' trouble when them cramps an' retches begin fer to ketch—ow-wow!"

Solemn Saul doubled up like the proverbial jack-knife, clasping both hands across his middle, his tall figure undergoing some of the most remarkable contortions imaginable.

Tim Pincher, who had opened his eyes with a start as he heard his own voice addressing him from another's lips, shrunk away as far as his bonds would permit, one hand tugging sharply

at a projecting rock as the only possible weapon within his reach.

Solemn Saul thrust out a long leg, his toe striking that bony wrist and paralyzing it for the time being, coolly saying in his own natural tones:

"Tetch 'em lightly, Timotheus, an' you ain't nigh so apt fer to burn your fingers! The time's comin' when you'll want to grab a root, but rocks is barred out o' this game. Stiddy, Timmy!"

Deftly twisting the arms of the trembling Bat behind his back, Solemn Saul renewed his bonds, rendering the fellow perfectly helpless unless outside aid should come to his relief.

"An' that's right why you want to do mighty heap hopin' that they won't none o' your feller blood-suckers tumble to my little racket, Timothy," gravely added the disguised detective, still using the tones and manner of his captive. "That's jest why you want to shoot your prayers an' good wishes an' the like high up as you know how with the clapper o' ye tied fast. Fer ef anythin' was to hender my comin' back this way on the own two legs o' me—waal, mebbe lightnin' 'll strike close enough 'round here to keep ye from starvin' to death!"

Grim consolation! But Timothy Pincher could only sink his teeth deeper into that stout gag, and almost choke himself in the vain effort to sound a plea for mercy.

Solemn Saul concealed his own pistols under his loose garments, substituting the tools formerly carried by Pincher, first assuring himself that they were very fair articles, and in good working order.

"More fer your sake than my own, mind ye, critter," he generously explained. "Tain't noways likely your pard's 'll look so mighty close that they'd notice the difference in guns, but ef they do think that much o' ye, it'd be a pity fer to give 'em an oneasy start."

With a final test of his captive's bonds, Solemn Saul left Tim Pincher to his own uneasy company, silently passing from the hill down to the pass, then making his way toward the secret entrance to the Den occupied by the Bats of Captain Vampire.

He well knew that discovery of his real character would mean almost certain death, but that knowledge only seemed to lend him increased nerve, and he never once faltered in the line he had blocked out for himself.

He could not be sure that Tim Pincher had not laid a trap for his destruction, despite his apparent terror. There might be a password, without which no true Bat would attempt an entrance to the Den. If so, and he failed to utter the open sesame, he might be shot down without having the ghost of a chance to defend himself.

"That's the odds I'm playing against," he grimly reflected, as he began toiling up that steep and winding trail, guided alone by the notes he had taken before the night cast all into gloom. "But if they give me even the shadow of a show, Captain Vampire will need to establish a recruiting station before he works any more rackets!"

As he drew closer to the point where he had watched the outlaws vanish from sight, the disguised detective began groaning and moaning, pausing at every second step to double up, hands clasping his middle like one suffering untold agonies with the colic.

"Hello, thar!" came an ugly, menacing voice from the bushes which screened the cave entrance. "Who's howlin' like a sick coyote? What in— That you, Pinch?"

"What's left—ow-wow!" and Solemn Saul once more bent double and squirmed like one suffering the tortures of the damned, but secretly with his hands each gripping a pistol-butt, ready to draw and fight for his life the instant suspicion should merge into discovery. "Ef I ever live—whisky, pard, ef you don't—holy smoke!"

"Bin hookin' green apples, ain't ye?" laughed the Bat, showing himself through the bushes, seemingly enjoying the ridiculous agony of his mate. "Boys will be boys, but whar you ketched a apple-tree out in this wooden kentry, gits me, bad."

"Ef it only would git—you!" gasped the disguised detective, once more doubling over and frantically stamping his feet. "It's p'izen—p'izen, that's what! An' ef—gimme drink, or I'll ha't you from death to all eternity!"

He staggered forward and steadied himself by a fierce clutch on the shoulder of the still laughing outlaw. But the fellow lent him a hand through the bushes, never once suspecting the startling truth.

Groaning faintly, but apparently granted a brief respite from his cramping pains, Solemn Saul trusted all to his guide, though he took careful note of each point as they proceeded to the cavern proper. He might have to beat a hasty retreat at any moment, when his life depended on his knowing each crook and turn in the passage.

"How did it ketch ye, pard?" asked his unsuspecting guide, as they entered the cavern where the ruddy light of the torches fell across their rude disguises.

"All over, in a turrible hurry," mumbled

Sunday, his tones faint and trembling, rendered even less distinct by the covering through which they had to pass. "Git me—Ow-wow!"

Another spasm of pain seemed to take possession of his entire being, and he writhed out of the grasp of his guide, staggering blindly to one side, sinking in a shivering heap against the rock wall.

The Bat followed him, grave enough now, and fearing that he was acting with even too much realism, Solemn Saul gave a mighty breath of relief, sitting erect as he faintly said:

"That was a killer! But—ef you'll jest swing me a bottle this way, pard, mebbe I kin drown'd it out."

"Bet ye kin," laughed the outlaw, meaningly. "It's a new wrinkle, Pincher, an' I'll store it up fer playin' on the gang my own self when the drouth gits too mighty bad."

"Play—ef I could only see ye playin' it the same way I've got to, I do reckon I could kick the bucket a-shoutin' glory to—"

Laughingly the Bat turned away, to speedily return with a bottle of the longed-for remedy, and his suspicions must have faded as he saw what a mighty draught of the fiery poison the sufferer sent where it might "do the most good."

"Thanks, pard," gasped Solemn Saul as he returned the flask. "May ye never want it as bad as I did jest—Durn the thing!" with a faint laugh as his hands sought his middle with quick pressure. "I thought she was comin' back ag'in, double tides!"

"Tetch o' the colic, I reckon," nodded his new-made friend, taking a liberal sample of the medicine himself, possibly as a preventive.

"A rip-snortin' old tetch!" groaned Solemn Saul, leaning back against the rocks, seemingly worn out, but in reality making the best possible use of his eyes. "A tetch big enough to kiver me all over like a sheet 'd kiver a baby bedbug! But—The boss isn't lookin', pardner?"

"He's back in the parlor, sparkin' up the gay gal we ketched 'long o' that sport, I reckon," laughed the outlaw in subdued tones as he cast a quick glance around them. "What makes ye ax, Pinch?"

"Waal, he set me on watch, you know, an'—Is they any more wet left in that bit o' glass, pard?" almost beseechingly, as he held out a hand. "'Pears like I feel them p'izen cramps comin' on an'—I jest knowed it!"

Once more, though in a more modest fashion, that internal warfare was renewed, and Solemn Saul played his part so well that the Bat at once thrust the whisky flask into his hands.

Sunday made a fair show of imbibing more medicine, but he simply moistened his lips, his shaking hands causing the contents to gurgle and cluck in a natural manner. He had already swallowed as much of the vile stuff as he dared.

"I'll lay it up ag'in' ye, pard," he said, earnestly, as he once more resigned the flask into its owner's hands. "An' I'm hopin' the time won't be long comin' ontel I kin do as much fer you!"

"I kin wait," was the laughing response, as the outlaw rose to his feet. "Shell I tell the boss you've got 'em too bad fer to keep watch?"

"Don't ye do it, pard!" with sudden eagerness. "I'm mighty sight better a'ready, an' I'll soon be able fer to crawl back thar to stick it out ontel my time's up."

"All right," nodded the other. "Keep quiet, an' the boss'll never know the differ' atwixt you an' any o' the rest, long's you keep the kiver over your mug."

Solemn Saul made no reply, and the unsuspecting Bat moved away.

Already the keen-eyed detective had taken in all points about him. Among them he noticed a human figure seated in a little recess, apparently bound to a point of rock projecting from the wall, and though he could obtain but a partial view from where he sat, Solemn Saul believed this to be his partner, Dandy Dutch.

There were several of the Bats lounging about in the spacious Den, but none of them appeared to have noticed his actions. And trusting that this indifference might continue, Sunday presently ventured to rise to his feet and walk toward the prisoner.

He quickly saw that his guess was correct, and while leaning against the wall not far from the captive, Saul guardedly spoke:

"Ropes or irons, pard?"

Dandy Dutch turned his head swiftly, but made no other sign as he recognized that familiar voice.

"Ropes. But you oughtn't to be here, mate!"

"I am, just the same. I'll free your hands, then leave you a knife to do the rest. Keep ready for a break when I kick up a row, pard."

"Don't think of it!" swiftly, earnestly uttered Dandy Dutch. "I'm safe enough. And I believe I've got hold of the right end at last! All I ask is a little more time, and you must pull out just as soon as you can without showin' your hand."

"Better you come, too!"

"I'm going to stick it out, make or break."

There was a dogged resolution in this that showed Solemn Saul the utter uselessness of further argument, but he hated to leave his partner in such a helpless situation, subject to the will of Captain Vampire and his evil gang.

Before he could do or say more, a hasty step drew near, and the tall chief of the outlaws harshly demanded:

"What does this mean? Why are you here, and what—"

"Blame me if any one, captain," quickly interposed Dandy Dutch. "I called him. I wanted to send word to you to come here for a bit."

CHAPTER XXX.

RANSOM FOR THE WRONG PERSON.

SOLEMN SAUL saw that nothing further could be effected by lingering near, and was only too glad to move away before Captain Vampire remembered that he had been placed on guard below.

Dandy Dutch covered his retreat by adding:

"I wanted to have a bit of a talk with you, captain, to see if we can't come to some sort of amicable arrangement together."

"Not tiring of your friends so early?" mockingly laughed the outlaw. "Couldn't you wait at least until day dawns?"

"If it was on my own account I could and doubtless would," coolly replied the detective. "But even you must admit that this sort of thing is hardly the cheese where a young lady is concerned."

"Maybe you're more concerned about it than that same lady," nodded the other, curtly. "What is she to you, or you to her?"

"She was in my company when she fell into your hands, Captain Vampire. Only for me she would not have halted in her ride, and so would have escaped this misfortune. If you grant so much, you must be able to understand why her safety and comfort means even more to me than my own chances of getting out of this hobble with a whole skin."

The outlaw turned abruptly away as though not ready to answer the particular points raised by his prisoner. And Dandy Dutch made no effort to detain him.

He had acted on impulse, catching at the first hope of covering the retreat of his venturesome partner, and he was by no means averse to having leisure granted him in which to shape his further course.

It will be remembered that immediately after being bound fast in the position he now occupied, Dandy Dutch was relieved of the heavy sack which had blinded him for a considerable period. And the first object which came under his gaze was the figure of La Masque, secured in much the same position as himself, directly opposite, under the ruddy glow of a pine torch.

Her velvet mask had been removed, laying bare a fair face with regular features. Only for its extreme pallor it would have been considered beautiful; but of all the features thus exposed, Dandy Dutch had eyes only for that fair left cheek.

At any time since first meeting La Masque, the detective would gladly have sacrificed a finger for the privilege of taking one square look at that same cheek, and how intent was his gaze now may be estimated from that value assigned.

He was looking for a scar, deep and defacing, running in a crescent form from just below the eye, down and upward to end a little in front of the left ear; the indelible brand which marked Frank, *alias* Silky Steele, escaped convict and doubly-dyed murderer.

There was nothing of the sort to be seen on the pale face of La Masque. Her cheek was smooth and unmarred. And though Dandy Dutch had never gazed upon the face of Frank Steele, his information convinced him that it would be literally impossible to conceal that scar by painting or kindred means, without leaving ample proof that such an effort had been made.

Once more he was wholly at sea, and hardly noticed the removal of La Masque, which was made shortly afterward, Captain Vampire leading her away in person.

Nor had he reached anything like a satisfactory solution of the tangle when Solemn Saul broke so suddenly in upon his thoughts. And though he had so confidently asserted that he "had hold of the right end," it was far more than he could have backed up with proofs if called upon to do so.

"Was this all you wanted to talk over," sharply asked the outlaw as he returned after a brief silence.

"Well, I wanted to decide whether I'd better spend my time in recalling the prayers of my childhood, or in counting up my balance in bank," gravely responded the Decorator.

"And that same balance?" asked Captain Vampire, squatting on his heels in front of his bound captive. "I'm trusting it makes a goodly mouthful, even to name. All on your account, of course!"

"A beggar would think it a feast, a rich man only a flea-bite."

"You won a right smart pile at the Oasis, last night!"

"I came out a little ahead of the game, I believe."

"To the tune of—how many thousands?"

"If you take the trouble to look in the wallet some of you appropriated when I wasn't looking, you'll find the receipt for what I got away with. I gave it to the clerk at my hotel."

"Seven thousand odd," nodded the outlaw.

"In that neighborhood, I reckon," with a yawn. "I didn't keep tally when Milton counted it over."

"You're too careless not to be a rich bloke," nodded the outlaw with a gleam of fire through the slit in his flour sack.

"I'm a sport. You're of a different caliber, or you'd know that while a dollar is within reach of a sport's fingers, he's rich. The smallest cartwheel you ever saw is plenty big for a sport to break any bank—until after he's tried and failed to make the raffle."

"And you have an account running at Corwin's bank."

"If you know so much, you know just how well heeled I am, financially speaking, captain," coolly nodded the detective. "Is it enough to buy the liberty of a captive, 'hink?'"

"You can raise much more than that, providing life hung on the effort," laughed the outlaw.

"Possibly. For instance, I might cause my valet, livery and all, to be put up at auction to be sold to the highest bidder. I might have a public sale of my spare suits; they ought to fetch fair prices, if only as curiosities in this infernally benighted region!"

"You're like a fool smoking his pipe in a powder-mill, Andre Deutsch!" frowned the captain, his tones growing cold and menacing. "I hold your life in the hollow of my hand. One word, a single sign, and out goes your light even more surely than when a spark falls into a raging flood!"

"Let her went!" flashed the prisoner, his eyes glowing defiantly and his face showing not the slightest trace of fear. "Do you think I sent for you to come and listen to me beg for life?"

"What else?"

"If so, you are 'way off your nut, my gallant chief of footpads and cut-throats. For myself, I care precious little how soon the game plays out, and barring the few ducats you picked out of my pocket, you've made a water-haul so far as capturing me is concerned."

"There's more ways than one to kill a cat!"

"You'll find more hair than fur about me."

"The hair of a bloodhound, for instance?" sneered the outlaw.

"Call it bull-terrier, please. Shall I run over my pedigree?"

"You'll never have a monument big enough to carve anything longer than 'Ass' upon it, Dandy Dutch, unless you alter your present mood, and that mighty soon! We work for money, and money we'll have if we are obliged to strip off your hide and tan it for sale!"

"Reserve a strip to hang yourself with, won't you?" laughed the undaunted detective. "But talking of money: while I swear I wouldn't give up even a lead dollar to buy your good will for myself, I'm more than willing to part freely for another."

"You mean La Masque?"

"I mean the lady whom I unfortunately caused to fall into your hands," gravely replied Dandy Dutch, all trace of reckless defiance vanishing from his face and voice. "Only for me, she would have missed you. And knowing so much, what can I say or do but offer you ransom, to the last dollar of my means, if necessary to win her freedom?"

There was no immediate reply. Captain Vampire sat in silence, a gloved hand lifted under the disguising flour-sack. He seemed to be deliberately weighing the situation, and with unconcealed impatience Andre Deutsch awaited his final decision.

"You seem to think a mighty sight of this woman, stranger!"

"I have already explained why I am willing to do for her what all your threats could never make me offer for myself."

"And on my word to set her free, you'll part with both your deposits in bank, and your boodle at the Occidental?" slowly asked the other.

"I'll give you an order for both, to be paid when La Masque is once more safe in Prospect."

Captain Vampire rose to his feet with a harsh, mocking laugh.

"Bah! you fool! If you could count out a thousand for every hundred of your pile, the sum couldn't touch one hand of La Masque!"

"By which I am to understand—"

"That she is a pearl far beyond price! That instead of selling her to you, my dandy sport, I'm going to woo, win and wear her myself!" laughed Captain Vampire, turning and vanishing from sight.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SAUL AS A SLAVE-DRIVER.

ONLY too glad to get away without being recognized by Captain Vampire as the man whom he had placed on guard-duty, Solemn

Saul beat a retreat, convinced that he could do nothing more for his partner.

His movements could not have been timed better, for not one of the genuine Bats was between himself and the mouth of the passage leading to the outer air, and hence there was little danger of discovery, particularly as he had just come from the presence of their chief.

Solemn Saul paused when at that mouth, to look back at his obstinate partner. He saw him covering that retreat by holding Captain Vampire in check, and once more Solemn Saul hesitated.

"It's almost sure death for him if they really suspect what he is," flashed through his troubled brain. "If I knew he'd really come, I'd wake the echoes of this Den after a mighty uneasy fashion."

But would he, even if set at liberty, after his positive refusal to accept an offer for his life?

"Be just like him to sit there and see us both pickled, rather than go back on his first decision!" half angrily decided the Sad Man from San Saba.

As though in confirmation, Dandy Dutch shook his head vehemently, apparently in answer to some remark made by Captain Vampire, but his dark eyes flashed a glance toward the point where Solemn Saul was inwardly debating the doubt, and the gaunt spy knew that his partner had intended the gesture for his especial benefit.

Even then Solemn Saul reluctantly left the Den, his thoughts anything but satisfactory.

"Talk about the obstinacy of a mule. Dandy can give points and a beating to the stubbornest specimen of a burro that ever wore hair."

He gave no thought to his own arduous labors that day, for Saul Sunday was by no means a selfish man. He counted the risks he had run as naught, and aside from his natural regret at leaving his partner behind him in such evil hands, his greatest regret was that Captain Vampire had put in such an early appearance, thus preventing the twain from agreeing upon their proper course of action.

"Course Dandy knows I'll do the best I know how, but what fresh wrinkle has he got in his cabeza? Something about La Masque, of course, but what?"

It was a question that could not be answered with his present lack of light, and Solemn Saul doggedly picked his way down the crooked trail without further delay.

He knew that it would be the bight of folly for him to attempt gaining another and more satisfactory interview with Dandy Dutch. He had been wonderfully favored by luck on his first attempt, but to enter the Den again would simply be tempting fate.

"It's a lone hand of your own choosing, Dandy, and if you get euchered, don't kick at my shins under the table."

Solemn Saul gave himself a mighty shake, as though he could by such means fling all care to the winds. And if he failed, he certainly showed no further signs of uneasiness on that point.

He paused for a short time at the shelf on which Tim Pincher had taken his perch before being captured. He gazed keenly back toward the cave entrance, though the gloom on the hillside was so deep that he could only guess at the precise point where the human Bats were wont to dive into their Den.

So far as he could tell all was right. There came no sounds from the hillside, no signs of chase being made, or of suspicious eyes trying to follow his movements.

"They're never a whit the wiser," he concluded, with a low, hard chuckle that barely passed the confines of the cowl which he still wore over his head and face. "Wonder what my facetious pard of the bottle will think when Tim Pincher fails to respond to roll-call?"

Keeping under the darkest shadows, Saul Sunday made his way back to the point where he had left Tim Pincher to chew the cud of bitter fancies, crouching low and creeping along with greater caution as he neared the spot. Though such a thing seemed hardly possible, it might have happened that a friend to the Bat had discovered his helpless situation and instead of alarming the Den, they be lying in wait for that audacious kidnapper.

Not until he fully satisfied himself that Tim Pincher was lying precisely as he had been left, with none other in hiding to trap the trapper, did Solemn Saul make his return known to that luckless rascal.

"Tickled mighty nigh to death, ain't ye?" chuckled Saul, as he saw how strongly agitated the Bat was at seeing his captor once more. "I shouldn't wonder ef you'd kep' the prayer line red-hot ever since I've bin gone, eh? Scorched a streak clean up through the blue, did ye? Ef it wasn't somethin' like that as pulled me back this way afore I got me good an' ready, I want to know why?"

Pincher came near suffocating in his vain efforts to speak, but his was not the first pair of jaws by many that Solemn Saul had prescribed for, and he could only give vent to an inarticulate murmur.

"An' now comes the next thing," grimly nodded the captor, squatting on his heels and

staring through that transverse slit at his helpless prize. "Which is whether I'd better tickle ye into the short ribs with my butcher, or chuck ye in a hole fer to wait ontel Gabriel toots, ef ye kin keep from starvin' that long!"

Tim Pincher shrunk away as far as his bonds would permit, shivering like some poor ague subject, too thoroughly frightened to doubt the perfect earnestness of his captor.

Sunday realized as much, and though he had no particular cause for showing the rascal mercy, he was quite willing to gain his ends with as brief mental torture as possible.

"Look here, Tim Pincher," his voice clear and resolute, though kept at a prudent pitch. "I'll treat you just as white as you deserve. I've got good reasons against leaving you here, where some of your mates would be almost sure to pick you up when daylight came. I want to take you—never mind just where, for the present. The main point is, will you go quietly, on your own feet, or shall I wipe you out?"

There could be no mistaking the answer offered by the outlaw, even though his tongue was silent and his limbs bound too securely for voluntary movement. His face was full of eager vows, and Solemn Saul knew that he would be given little trouble, at least while that state of mind lasted.

"All right, Timothy," he nodded, proceeding to cast off his borrowed disguise as the preliminary move. "I'll treat you as white as the law 'lows, but ef you try to kick over the traces—waal, salt won't keep ye from sp'ilin' too mighty quick!"

Leaving the gag in place, Solemn Saul freed the arms of his prize to permit him to don his outer garments, with his own hands slipping the flour sack over the Bat's head. Then he cut the thongs which held his lower limbs helpless, lending a hand to set Pincher safely upon his temporarily benumbed feet.

"We're goin' to take a walk, Timmy, you'n' me," he added by way of final caution. "Sence your prayers done so well in fetchin' me back on my own laigs, better you do it some more on your own a'count. Jest pray that we don't run up ag'in' any o' your Bat tribe, fer ef we do, they'll hev the fun o' plantin' ye. You'll be too mighty dead fer anythin' else but that, Timothy!"

With a hand resting on the shoulder of the Bat, a revolver ready for use in his other hand, Solemn Saul forced the rascal to descend the rugged slope, leaving him the full use of his limbs until they reached the comparatively level pass.

"T'won't do to tempt ye too mighty powerful, Timotheus," he gravely offered as an explanation for halting his captive and binding both hands behind his back. "Fu'st off I didn't keer how quick ye gave me a fa' excuse fer shettin' out yer light, but things ain't the same way no longer. I've bin poor white plenty long time. Now I'm goin' fer to put on frills an' scallops an' come out gelorious! An' I reckon that when I've flattened out that beak o' yours a foot or so, an' piled on a coat or three o' shoe-black, an' frizzled the head o' ye over a hot stove-lead, I kin make a right piert-lookin' nigger out o' ye! Walk along, John! They's spurs onto the heels o' me nine inches in the cl'ar, an' ef I hev to use 'em— Good boy!"

Tim Pincher showed a most laudable desire to act precisely as his new owner desired, and Solemn Saul congratulated himself on having secured such a tractable captive. When the proper time came, it ought to be no very difficult task to strain Tim Pincher dry of information.

The start had scarcely been made afresh down the pass, when the keen ears of Solemn Saul caught the rapid clattering of iron-shod hoofs approaching from the direction of the Bats' Den, and at once jumped to the conclusion that his audacious exploit had been discovered and pursuit was being made by the enraged outlaws.

There was little time in which to hunt a secure covert, but he grasped Tim Pincher by the neck and drove him headlong into a niche along the side of the pass, crowding in beside him, grimly muttering:

"Make a sound, or try even to kick, and I'll rip you open that minute, my fine fellow! I mean pure business now!"

There was time for no more, and, with a revolver in each hand, Solemn Saul waited, resolved to die rather than submit to capture. Then—

Nearly a dozen horsemen dashed swiftly past his place of hiding, without pause or look in that direction, vanishing amidst the gloom, the clatter of hoofs speedily dying away in the distance.

Swift as their passage had been, Sunday saw enough to be fairly sure they formed part of the Bats, and almost equally certain that his partner was not among their number.

He deliberated a short time whether or no he had better turn back to revisit the Den, but finally decided in the negative. Unless he had already been put to death, Dandy Dutch was in no worse peril now than when he had bluntly refused to accept a rescue.

Sunday dragged his frightened prisoner forth

from the niche, and shortly after struck into a more direct trail for Prospect.

While hounding the captors of his partner, he had kept his eyes open in other directions, and knew that Prospect lay a good many miles nearer the Den than that trail would seem to indicate.

Tireless himself, the gaunt detective showed Tim Pincher little mercy, pushing him on at top speed, though he removed the gag after they were fairly clear of the trail used by the Bats. Only for this, the luckless rascal would hardly have made the trip without breaking down.

There were very few lights visible in Prospect when Solemn Saul came near enough to gaze upon the town, and this fact seemed to afford him more satisfaction than regret. For certain good reasons, he preferred to make his entrance without awakening curiosity.

The better to insure this, he removed the cowl worn by Tim Pincher, and crowded it into a pocket of Tim's coat. He also cut the bonds which held his hands behind him, at the same time uttering the warning:

"I'm going to take you to the house of city marshal, Fred Keppler, my fine fellow. I'd rather take you there alive, but go you shall. Now try to keep this much in your mind, please: I'll kill you as an outlaw trying to escape, at the first crooked move you make!"

With this grim warning Solemn Saul resumed his journey, entering Prospect, keeping to the more secluded streets as much as possible, and finally reaching the home of the city marshal, whom he easily roused from bed to admit himself and captive.

For perhaps an hour Sunday remained inside, and when he emerged it was alone. Tim Pincher had been left under care of the worthy official, who felt a great deal wiser than when he had first retired.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A DREADFUL DISCOVERY.

It was a little later than usual that bright Monday morning when Leonard Corwin left his residence to walk down to his bank.

This may have been because his rest had been seriously disturbed for the past two nights, the effects of which showed plainly in his face.

All that Sabbath Day he had waited for his nephew to appear and apologize for the passion in which he had torn himself away the night before, but in vain. Dudley Mann neither called nor sent a note, and though his name was not mentioned between them, he could see that Lida was suffering no little from suspense.

Knowing his own good intentions in reading his nephew that grave lecture, Leonard Corwin never once thought of seeking the angry youth out for further explanations. It was Dudley's place to make the first advance, though even as he mentally said this, Mr. Corwin decided that he would positively decline to receive the resignation of his clerk.

"He'll have had ample time in which to think it all over," he mused while walking down-town. "He's too stiff-necked to bow of his own accord, but he'll melt when I offer him the hand of reconciliation. I'd do it for his mother's sake, if not for his own. And then—"

He was recalling the pale face and heavy eyes of his only child. He could see her mutely appealing gaze as she had parted with him at the hall door.

"For the little girl's sake, most of all!"

A surprise awaited him as he came in sight of the bank building. The colored man who swept out the bank every morning after its doors had been opened by Dudley Mann, was squatting idly on the stone steps, and Aubrey Conyers was pacing to and fro, his face grave if not anxious.

He rapidly advanced to meet the banker, grasping his hand warmly, as he half-laughingly uttered:

"Good-morning, Mr. Corwin. Do you know, I was almost on the point of hunting you up? I began to think— Young Mann is rather late in opening up, isn't he?"

Corwin glanced mechanically at his watch, though he knew the hour for opening the bank was past. His florid face grew pale, and so evident was his start that Conyers almost sharply demanded:

"There's nothing wrong, I trust, sir?"

"What can be wrong?" testily retorted Corwin, hastening forward and brushing past the colored man without noticing his salutation.

"Nothing, I trust, and yet—"

But Leonard Corwin was not listening to his words, and Conyers left the sentence unfinished. The banker unlocked the door with his own key, swinging it to behind him, but not pausing to lock it again in his fears for his nephew. And as he hastened to the little office back of the bank proper, where Dudley Mann was accustomed to sleep, he did not notice that Aubrey Conyers pushed the door open to enter himself.

Despite his usual nerve, Leonard Corwin uttered a cry of mingled wonder and alarm as he saw that the little office was unoccupied; nor had the narrow bed been slept in the night last past!

"Begins to look rather dubious, don't you think, Corwin?" asked the proprietor of the Oasis, his voice grown harsh and suspicious.

"What do you mean, sir?" flashed the banker, wheeling with his clinched right hand, his pale face flushing and his eyes beginning to glow.

"I mean that everything looks as though your cashier had thrown up his position," sneered Conyers, one hand slipping into his breast to instantly reappear with several slips of paper in his fingers. "If you want to know why I say so, perhaps these bills will suffice!"

Almost unconsciously Leonard Corwin took the slips of paper, his business eye instantly recognizing their value. And each of them bore the rather peculiar signature of his nephew and cashier.

With a desperate effort he choked down his emotion, coldly saying:

"Do you wish to draw the cash on these notes, Mr. Conyers?"

"They are perfectly square, then?"

"Your remarks are insulting, sir," was the cold reproof. "You have been a steady customer, but under the circumstances, sir, I must request you to consider your account closed from this day on."

Conyers took back the notes, bowing icily, then retreating to the bank proper. Scarcely had he done so when Major Holly Gardenhire rushed into the building, excitedly crying to Conyers, apparently without noticing the presence of the banker within the railing:

"It's a cold sell-out, I'm afraid, Conyers. The agent says he saw young Mann take a freight, late last night!"

"What do you mean by talking in this manner, Major Gardenhire?" sharply interposed the banker, coming forward and facing the two excited men, his own face showing a shade paler than usual, though he fought nobly against yielding to the awful dread which was knocking at his heart for entrance.

The major seemed a bit confused at this, but hurriedly thrust his head through the opening in the wire screen, whispering:

"I was an ass for blurting it out so brash, Corwin, but the shock was too great when I thought of you and Miss Corwin, who—"

The banker cut his speech short by an imperious gesture. That name recalled the scene when last he met this man, and for the moment he forgot all else. Only to have his growing fears recalled by the next words and actions of the major.

"Close and lock the door, Conyers!" he sharply cried. "No need to take all Prospect into your confidence, Mr. Corwin, forcing a faint smile as he turned again. "Time enough for that when you make sure you have not suffered equally with ourselves."

"Will you tell me precisely what you mean, Major Gardenhire?"

"I mean that we have good reason to fear that Dudley Mann has run away from town in the night, sir, because he owed far more debts than he could ever hope to pay without—"

"On your peril, sir!" flashed the banker.

"Be it so," with a cold bow. "I would have warned you that your cashier was over head and ears in debt, only for the prayers of your daughter. For her sake I spared him then. Now—I trust he has not added a fresh load to his conscience!"

Despite his strong nerves, Leonard Corwin was sorely shaken. His limbs trembled so that he was forced to seat himself, and seeing this Major Holly Gardenhire turned and almost forced Conyers back to the door, coldly uttering:

"I'll stand responsible for any claim which you may hold, Conyers, and if you are a gentleman you will step outside. And keep your own counsel until Mr. Corwin can see his way clear, please."

Though with seeming reluctance Aubrey Conyers left the room, Major Gardenhire closing the door behind him and turning the key in its wards.

This accomplished, Gardenhire passed around to enter the inclosure where the banker was sitting, hurriedly saying:

"It's awfully cheeky of me, Corwin, but no true friend would take offense or leave you in such trouble as this. And I fear you'll find it far worse than you can realize just at present."

"Shut up!" with sudden energy as he sprang to his feet. "I'll not hearken to one of your vile hints, and if you persist—"

"If I do, it is for your own sake, Mr. Corwin," with grave dignity that sat admirably upon him. "As a proof—is this your signature?"

He suddenly held a sight draft before the eyes of the banker, making no attempt to retain the paper when Corwin snatched it from his hand. To drop the damning evidence with a choking groan a moment later.

Gardenhire picked up the paper, slipping it back into his breast.

"It was this, in part, that led me to warn your daughter, Mr. Corwin," he said, gravely. "I took up two other bits of paper similar to this, more to quietly satisfy myself that they were all right than as a speculation. It was all in the way of business, of course. And yet—you know now that my suspicions were well founded."

"I can't—I refuse to believe it of my sister's son!"

And yet he could not help but believe, for right well he knew that his hand never traced that signature. Who else could have done so but Dudley Mann.

"We'll hope it is all a mistake, which can readily be explained by Mr. Mann," quietly said the major, walking toward the vault and trying its fastenings. "All seems in order here, Mr. Corwin!"

Moving like a man in a horrible dream, the banker opened the vault and unlocked the safe it contained. A gasping cry escaped his lips as he saw that the money which should have been revealed, was not, and only a folded slip of paper directed to himself remained in its place.

He caught this up and unfolded it. Only a line of hasty writing:

"This is my resignation, uncle! Tell Lida to forget, if she can't forgive. It was gaming that brought me to this!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BLOW FOLLOWS BLOW.

THERE was neither address nor signature to this bit of writing, but neither was necessary in the eyes of the terribly-shocked banker to prove that the son of his dead sister had written the lines.

Even if the handwriting had not been so unmistakably that of Dudley Mann's, the place of finding was sufficient to condemn him.

Leonard Corwin staggered back from the rifled safe, clasping a hand to his temples and gasping for breath. Only for the ready arms and aid of the major, he must have fallen to the floor.

With a degree of muscular power remarkable in a man of his size and build, Major Holly Gardenhire carried rather than supported the sorely-stricken man to a chair, placing him therein, fanning him swiftly as the best method of restoration within his reach.

"Try to brace up, dear friend," the arch-hypocrite spoke, earnestly and soothingly. "It's awfully tough, and all that, of course, but then you have your daughter to consider. Think how hard it will hit her. But how much harder would it be if she couldn't have your strength to lean upon!"

"Robbed—dishonored—all gone!" huskily uttered Leonard Corwin, already seeming aged by years since first crossing that threshold for the week.

"Not that bad, we'll keep on hoping, dear sir," cheerily said the major. "Mann can't have made a clean sweep, surely?"

Leonard Corwin only groaned in reply. Stunned, confused, with his brain on fire and his heart but imperfectly performing its duties, he still could realize so much. Ruin and disgrace must surely come upon him unless this horrible discovery could be staved off long enough for monetary aid to be secured from his correspondents in other towns.

"I know that the young fellow has been racketing nights after a mighty lively fashion, but I never gave that a second thought until I chanced to hear that he had nothing to back him save his salary as your clerk. Then—"

The major seemed bound to prove himself a Job's comforter that day. Leonard Corwin could not bear mention of his treacherous nephew, and with a hoarse, choking cry he rose to his feet, only to stagger blindly across the room to the rifled safe.

He could hardly have been acting on a hope, for though brief, his former search had been thorough. Not a dollar was left in the safe.

"He's got it hard—heap harder than I ever thought!" muttered Gardenhire, watching the banker until he saw that no desperate resolve had forced him from his seat, then hurrying around the end of the counter to reach the front door.

A glance under the blind showed him a number of citizens gathered in the street, standing about in little knots, eagerly conversing and watching the building with morbid curiosity in every feature.

That same glance showed him Jim Fowler, the negro man who cleaned up the bank every morning, still standing on the steps, as though he could not understand why his regular duties should be interrupted. And knowing that the big fellow was thoroughly trustworthy, the major opened the door and hastily pulled him inside, closing and snapping the key as quickly as possible, for the waiting groups made a forward rush.

"It's an ugly bit of business, my man," hurriedly explained the major, while leading Fowler behind the counter. "The old gentleman has been stunned by it, and isn't fit to have a row with the fellows outside. You'd better take him home; use the back door, and I'll see that the crowd don't follow, for a time, anyhow."

"Yes, take me home, Fowler," feebly muttered Leonard Corwin, turning away from the empty safe. "There's nothing for me to do here. Nothing for me to do but—God!" with a shiver as he bowed his head still lower. "Noth-

ing for me but bitter black disgrace in my old age!"

The last words seemed wrenched from his lips by the sharp pounding on the front door, supplemented by calls upon his own name, bidding him open and let them know what was the worst they had to fear.

Major Gardenhire sharply motioned Fowler to lead the banker away, himself seeing that they escaped observation by the crowd whose whole attention was given to the front door and curtained windows.

Waiting until the banker was safely around the nearest corner, by way of the alley, Gardenhire returned to the bank, closing the safe and locking the vault, laughing softly as he did so:

"It's a sort of evidence that a mob can't well carry away or destroy, but as it's about all we poor devils of depositors will ever get in settlement of our claims, better lock that empty void up!"

A grim jest for a man who had lost so much through the rascality of the absconding clerk, one might think, but Major Holly Gardenhire showed himself quite the philosopher in those first trying hours.

Using the pen which recently belonged to Dudley Mann, smiling grimly as he recognized the fact, Gardenhire wrote in large letters on a sheet of bank-paper that the institution was closed until the next day, when payment would surely be resumed.

To this he appended the name of Leonard Corwin, showing no mean degree of skill in handling his pen, though making no actual attempt to imitate the banker's signature. And attaching wafers to each corner of the letter-head, he stuck the paper on the glass door, under the still drawn blinds.

Instant silence greeted this action, and under cover of this the major left the bank by way of the rear door, striding rapidly through the alley and pausing just long enough at the corner to sum up the greatly-increased crowd in front of the building.

"Dollars to cents they'll make those lights look mighty sick before they suspect the rat has hunted another hole!" he chuckled beneath his beard as he caught the angry, growing cries of the gathering crowd. "But I've got better business than watching their antics!"

Trusting to the excitement of the mob to prevent them from recognizing him, even should any of their number glance in that direction before he had passed out of sight, Major Holly Gardenhire hastened off in the direction of the Corwin residence.

As yet the excitement had not spread, and the major found none to interrupt his progress, quickly reaching the home of those against whom he was scheming so evilly. He found no difficulty in gaining admittance, for Jim Fowler, who was just leaving the house, held open the door for his passage.

"Keep out of the muss, and don't open your head to say a word, or to tell of anything you've seen and heard, my good fellow," hurriedly muttered the major, his hand deftly ridding itself of a couple of minor silver coins, then pushing the bewildered negro toward the gate.

Closing the door behind him, Gardenhire paused for a moment to listen. He caught the sounds of subdued sobs coming from the direction of the parlor, and recognized the tones of Lida Corwin.

His eyes flashed redly for the instant, but then the lids contracted to form their accustomed squint, and his face was once more a mask that concealed his inward triumph. All was working to perfection, and complete success was only a matter of time.

"The young rascal couldn't have levanted at a better time to suit my book," he chuckled, then crossed the hall to open the door.

Leonard Corwin was seated in an easy-chair, his form bowed, his head touching that of his daughter who knelt before him, sobbing like one whose heart is well-nigh broken by a terrible blow.

Gardenhire closed the door behind him with an audible jar, and at the sound both father and daughter lifted their heads. Lida sprang to her feet, shrinking away from the man, yet with a flush of hot indignation leaping into her face and causing her eyes to flash as she cried:

"You—how dare you to intrude upon—"

"Because I am your friend, Miss Corwin," quickly interposed Gardenhire, advancing with grave earnestness impressed upon every feature. "And Heaven knows that friends will not be so numerous now that you can afford to drive them away without just cause."

"He says true, Lida," brokenly muttered Corwin, drawing the frightened maiden to his side with a trembling arm. "Would to Heaven that I had listened to him Saturday! It might not have been too late, then, to have saved—that misguided wretch!"

"Don't—I can't bear it, father!" sobbed Lida, her head drooping to his shoulder. "I—I loved him so dearly!"

Those words were as gall to the listener, and if he had felt any pangs of pity, Major Gardenhire knew them no longer.

"I fear the young man was past saving, so

late as that, Mr. Corwin, but if I had spoken out plainly at least something might have been saved from the wreck."

"It was your duty, sir!" flashed the banker. "Why didn't you speak out? Why didn't you tell all you knew or suspected?"

"I would have done so, sir, only for your daughter. Miss Corwin begged me to hold my peace. You ought to remember as much, even with such sore trouble weighting you down now."

"Because it was all a lie!" flashed Lida, loyal to her lover even when all others were ready to kick him still lower into the mire. "And even now I will not, cannot believe—"

Her father checked her passionate speech, seeming to recover his composure as she lost hers. He drew her down into the chair which he had vacated, and standing by her side, one hand resting lovingly on her bowed head, he turned to Major Gardenhire, saying:

"I fear there is no doubt as to his sin, major, but at least it can do no harm if I ask you how you came to know his wrong-doing while I remained in complete ignorance?"

"He was your relative, and you had cause to place complete confidence in his honor," was the grave response. "I am a man of business, and that business at times carries me into places and scenes to which you are a stranger."

"I knew, as nearly all the town knew, that young Mann was gambling heavily, and though he won at spells, of late he has been extremely unlucky. And when those notes came across my way, in business, I began to fear something was going wrong. Perhaps I ought to have told you of my doubts, but—would you have done so under the same circumstances?"

Leonard Corwin understood this question far more readily than did his daughter. Major Gardenhire had recently begged permission to address his daughter as a suitor for her hand in marriage. Dudley Mann also was in love with her. As a rival in love, naturally the major would be loth to accuse his nephew of wrongdoing, on mere suspicion.

"Even when these notes reached me, I hoped that they might be straight, though the sum was so large that I deemed it only right to ask your opinion. I meant to have done so last Saturday but you know what hindered me."

"Then, while at my hotel, yesterday, Conyers came to me and showed me some paper which passed to him over the faro table. He wanted to see if I wouldn't take them at a discount, as he needed the cash, and hated to expose your nephew to you if it could be helped. I put him off for the time, but when the night agent told me that he had caught sight of Dudley Mann, rudely disguised, stealing on to the Freight at one o'clock, last night, I knew the worst had come."

Even Lida could say nothing in the face of this terse and terrible statement. And with the memory of those few heartless words which alone had been found in the safe at the bank, Leonard Corwin knew that if he spoke at all, it must be to hurl a bitter curse after the reckless youth who had so completely ruined him.

Then, distant and indistinct at first, but rapidly increasing and coming nearer, the trio caught the sounds of a gathering mob!

And presently those sounds grew into words; into fierce yells for restitution; into savage threats which meant death, swift and shameful!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE MAJOR DISSOLVES PARTNERSHIP.

AS Lida Corwin caught the full meaning of those growing threats, her overwrought senses gave way, and with a choking cry she fainted.

Major Gardenhire dashed to the door and almost ran against the pale and frightened housekeeper, whom he fiercely grasped and dragged into the room, bidding her look after her young mistress.

"And you, Corwin, keep out of sight while I try to choke off those infernal idiots who are howling for they hardly know what! Trust to me, and I'll pull you through in safety or go down in the wreck myself!"

Generous words, truly!

So, at least, Leonard Corwin thought as he gazed almost stunned at his senseless child. For he knew that if all was lost, the major must suffer in pocket far more heavily than any other single depositor.

Gardenhire did not stop for an answer, but hastened from the room and to the front door, flinging this open to emerge, but closing it behind him, standing on the veranda, facing and defying the excited mob, a cocked revolver in his hand, resting lightly across his breast.

As he stepped into view, that hideous shouting died away, all eyes turned eagerly upon that figure. But the short, slight figure with its dark coat tightly buttoned across its bosom, could not long be mistaken for the portly outlines of the man they most wanted to see at that moment, and the ugly mutterings began again, threatening to speedily outdo all that had gone before.

Major Holly Gardenhire looked every inch a hero as he stood unflinchingly before that crowd, lifting his empty left hand as though

commanding silence. Perhaps the units forming that mob recognized the hero, and honored the man, for the growling died down to a sullen murmur.

"Men of Prospect!" began the major, his voice ringing out clear and sharp, each word distinct and audible to the furthestmost member.

"Durn the speechifyin'!" shouted one rough fellow from the rear ranks. "What we want is old Corwin! Show him up an' shet your head!"

"You are a cur, or you'd wait to do your barking until nearer the front where a honest kick could reach your mangy hide!" hotly returned the major, losing his head just when he should have kept coolest.

"Maybe he's playing in cahoots with the old fraud!" yelled another of the gathering.

A most unpromising beginning, truly! And as though he realized as much, Gardenhire permitted that last insult to pass without notice or reply, though his words came freely enough:

"I beg of you, men of Prospect, not to make a bad matter worse! If you will only have patience for a few hours, I am confident that all will be explained to your perfect satisfaction."

"Let Corwin come and tell us that same, if he isn't ashamed to show his face to the eyes of honest men!"

"And where's Dudley Mann? How much money did he leave in the bank when he levanted with his boodle?"

"Bring on the rope!" yelled still another, savagely. "Durn all talk by an outsider! Yank the old devil up a tree, and he'll squeal to some purpose!"

"Back!" thundered Gardenhire, his revolver coming to a level, and menacing the foremost men. "I'll explain all if you'll listen, but I'll kill the first man to cross that fence!"

Only one man, and he scarce greater in stature than a lad just entering his teens. But in his hand was a business-like pistol, and in his eyes glowed the fire which comes only with full growth.

The foremost men shrunk back before they had time to think, and Major Gardenhire promptly improved his opportunity.

"If you must talk of lynching in this law-abiding town, turn your thoughts toward the real criminal, not upon his greatest victim! Why, gentlemen, do you know that if all we fear is true, Leonard Corwin has lost—will lose a great deal of money?" hastily, trying to cover over the slip his tongue made; but in vain.

"Whose money was it?" hoarsely cried Aubrey Conyers, pressing his broad shoulders through the crowd and nearing the front, his face paler than ever, his blue eyes seeming to flash with living fire. "That of the confiding idiots who placed their ducats in the hands of the high-toned rascal you are trying to defend, Major Gardenhire! That of poor fools who trusted a fair face, an unctuous smile, a plausible voice that blessed their credulity while robbing them with both hands!"

"I deny all that, Aubrey Conyers, and if you are the man you lay claim to being, you will help quiet this mob instead of trying to drive them into a hideous crime—a sin for which they will weep tears of blood through all eternity!"

"And fall back to weep tears of starvation instead?" sneered the athletic gambler. "You mean well, from your standpoint, Major Gardenhire, but you're fighting in a mighty mean cause. Why don't Leonard Corwin stand forth like a man, if he is such, and explain how terribly his own nephew has wronged him, with the rest of us?"

Before the major could reply to this pointed question, the door at his back was flung open, and the banker stepped forth in full view of the howling mob. Pale as a corpse, his face showing how terribly he had suffered during those few brief hours, he boldly faced his enemies, and when Gardenhire would have pushed him back under cover, Leonard Corwin resisted, his tones ringing out clear and distinct:

"The person who accuses me of willful fraud is a liar, viler than the charge he brings against me!"

"Pay us our money!"

"Money or blood!"

"Lynch the thieving villain!"

"For heaven's sake!" panted Gardenhire, exerting a degree of strength wonderful in a man of his build, forcing the banker back through the open door, but then seeming to lose control of him.

Driven to frenzy by those wild charges, Leonard Corwin broke from the major's grasp, turning to again face down his accusers, even though death should be the penalty of his rashness. And then—

From under cover of that portly figure, Major Holly Gardenhire took swift but deadly aim at the athletic figure of Aubrey Conyers. He fired, seeing the tall gambler reel back with a choking cry of agony!

And as Leonard Corwin started forward, partly through surprise at that shot, partly because the impulse had already been lent himself, the murderer slammed the door shut, turning the

key and slipping it into his pocket as he darted back to the parlor.

He met Lida at the door, pale, trembling, bewildered, yet fearing for her father, but he did not stop to listen or to answer. Throwing his arms about her waist, he lifted her clear of the floor, running swiftly along the hall to escape by a rear door, calling over his shoulder to the terrified housekeeper:

"Go hide, if you would save yourself, woman! I'll save Lida or die in the attempt!"

"Stop!" faintly cried the maiden, as her abductor left the hall to cross the dining-room in the direction of the kitchen. "My father—"

"Is being cared for by good friends," hurriedly interposed the bold schemer, resisting her efforts to regain her feet. "But if you remain here, those mad devils will hurt you while wrecking the house!"

The brief silence which had followed that treacherous shot, was now broken by a savage chorus of yells and threats, so loud as to actually make that substantial building quiver for the moment. And hearing this, poor Lida gave a choking cry of terror, more for her father than on her own account.

"Good enough!" chuckled the major, as he felt her head strike his own, and a glance showed him that a merciful unconsciousness had again been briefly granted her. "A squeal or two from her sweet lips might spoil the whole arrangement! Now—get there, Eli!"

A glance outside showed him that the excited mob had not yet bethought themselves to invest the building on all sides, and bearing Lida Corwin's weight as though it had been no more than a feather, Major Holly Gardenhire sprang into the back yard, running swiftly toward the stables to the rear.

A crouching figure leaped into view as he came near, but neither recoiled, for recognition was mutual.

"Good Lawd, boss! I done reckoned you wasn't never comin'!" huskily cried the negro who served as coachman to the banker. "Deed I was turrible tempted fer to tek de boss an' run away wid myse'f, so I was!"

"All's in readiness, then?" panted the major, entering the stable and pressing through to an open door on the other side.

"Fo' suah, sah!" grinned the frightened negro as he unfastened the halter-strap by which the animal was secured until needed.

Throwing him several gold-coins, Gardenhire put Lida into the rig, springing in after her, then driving through the alley at full speed.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CAUGHT IN THE TOILS.

MAJOR HOLLY GARDENHIRE had chosen his vehicle with an eye to the rough roads leading out of Prospect, rather than for its beauty or comfort, it being a "buck-board," for one horse.

Around the platform ran an iron railing of perhaps a foot in height, frail in looks, but really stout and substantial.

As the spirited horse started away through the alley at a round trot, the major permitted his unconscious companion to slip down to the bottom of the vehicle, between the seat and the dasher, with his free hand deftly covering her over with the robe, steadying her head and shoulders by the grip of his knees.

This arranged to his satisfaction, the bold schemer gave his entire attention to getting out of Prospect as quickly as might be, while avoiding the more public streets where his rapid flight might possibly meet with interruption.

From the direction of the Corwin residence came the roar of wild and vengeful shouts, and his eyes glowed with an ugly fire as he muttered through his beard:

"Sorry for you, old fellow, but I couldn't resist the temptation of killing two birds with one stone! Rather tough on the banker, too!"

He laughed almost fiercely as he recalled that treacherous shot and felt how horribly amazed Aubrey Conyers must have been when he realized the truth.

"If he ever knew what hit him! Why did he offer me such a tempting target, then? He's old enough to know that a whole loaf is twice as good as a half!"

Brief though these sentences were, they lasted until he was fairly on the outskirts of Prospect and with the hills unblocked before him, Major Gardenhire felt that he could proceed with less reckless haste.

He checked the swift trotter until he could manage him with one hand, turning back the robe and permitting the fresh air to fan the pale face of his unconscious companion, his eyes glowing with an ugly light as he noted her perfect features.

"Well worth the winning, even without the boodle to back it up!" he mentally decided.

"If the beauty will only— I beg of you, Miss Corwin!" his tones suddenly changing to excited solicitude as he saw the poor girl open her eyes and start as though to regain her feet. "I will save you. Only trust in me."

"Father—they will murder him!" faintly

gasped Lida, not yet realizing her position, but taking up the thread of thought where it had snapped in her own home.

"Your father is safe, Miss Corwin," distinctly asserted the major, sending the trotter ahead at full speed as though still fleeing from the enraged mob. "I am taking you to join him, by his own wishes."

There was no answer. Stunned, bewildered, the maiden stared at the rocks and trees as they seemed to rush past her.

"We're dropping them rapidly, dear Lida," added the major, steadying her form with his knees, and letting his trotter spin along the flinty trail at full speed. "They're out of sight, and must soon give it up as a bad job. Even if they turn back for horses, we'll cheat 'em in the end! Try to think of that, dear, and bear up, if only for your father's sake!"

"What of him? Where is he?" huskily sobbed the tortured girl, that honored title seeming to rouse her from the dull stupor which had fallen over her brain. "Father—you villain!" she panted, as though for the first time recognizing the man in whose company she found herself.

"Your best, truest friend, Miss Corwin," almost sternly interposed Gardenhire, jerking his trotter down to a more modest pace, freeing his left hand to better restrain the half-crazed maiden. "I am saving you from worse than death! And in saving you thus, I am doing all that mortal man can to save your father from the consequence of his own mad action!"

"You dare not accuse him of—"

"Only of shooting the villain who foully insulted him on his own threshold, Miss Corwin," coldly interrupted the major, speaking swiftly, like one who fully realizes the great value of time. "I would have done the same thing, no doubt, but all the same it was a desperate deed, with such a howling mob looking on. And your father escaped being torn limb from limb only by a miracle!"

"Where is he? Take me to poor father!" sobbed Lida.

"I am taking you to him, as directly as I dared," glibly lied the bold schemer. "He is guarded by true friends, making his way to Eagle's Nest. I offered to draw the mob on a false scent, and they followed us in the belief that your father was with you. They are still following, but too far behind to be very dangerous now, unless you so delay me that they can come up once more."

Gardenhire did not pause to pick and choose his words, depending no little on the confused state of her brain to have his inconsistent explanation received as truth. And in this hope he was not disappointed, for poor Lida said no more, crouching down in the vehicle, muffling her ears with the robe, shivering as in fancy she caught those horrible yells for human blood.

Major Gardenhire improved this respite to the best advantage, putting another mile or two behind them before slackening his pace. The road was growing too rough for further flight at speed, even with the stout rig which he had taken care to provide.

"The peril is past for the present, dear Miss Corwin," he said, letting his good trotter come down to a walk while he gently but firmly lifted his victim to a seat by his side. "Those knaves have gone back after horses, I reckon, but even so, they'll have their trouble for their reward."

"Take me to father, please. Where is he? You are not deceiving me, sir?" with a pitiful doubt struggling through her tears as she gazed into the face of her companion. "You would not—is he—"

"Alive and unharmed, I verily believe, dear child," Gardenhire said as he read her wish. "I did what I could to quiet the mob. I believe I could have won them over to reason, only—you heard that shot?"

Lida shivered, her eyes closing dizzily.

"Insults and vile charges drove him crazy, I think, and he did not know what he was doing when he fired that shot into the crowd. If it had only missed! But maybe the man was only wounded—maybe he will recover, though he fell like a log!"

"He never—you had the pistol!" flashed Lida, but then sunk down with a pitiful moan as Gardenhire quickly uttered:

"I'd gladly stand the blame, for your dear sake, Lida, but that is out of the question. I was inside. Your father hurled me back, and a score of men must have seen him fire the fatal shot!"

Before the girl could say more, several cowed figures leaped out from the bushes, one grasping the horse by the head, others crowding around the buckboard, crying, savagely:

"Don't hurt her—kill him if he offers fight!"

Lida shrieked wildly, fancying that the men of Prospect had intercepted them, and as though driven to desperation by her terror, Major Gardenhire jerked out a revolver and began emptying it as rapidly as possible.

Lida heard oaths and groans, then saw her protector stagger and pitch headlong out of the buckboard directly into the arms of the enemy, to be covered over with savagely cursing forms.

She felt rough hands close upon her own

person, then mercifully lost her consciousness once more.

"Lida—Miss Corwin?"

"Who—where am I?" faintly gasped the poor girl as she strove to rise, bewilderedly staring around her the while.

"Thank Heaven! I began to believe you were dead!" came that tremulous voice out of the intense blackness: the voice of Major Holly Gardenhire, as the banker's daughter now began to realize.

Where was she? How long had that death-like swoon lasted? What had happened during her insensibility?

"Speak to me, dear lady!" huskily added the unseen speaker. "Say that you are alive—say that I am not dreaming—not driven mad, as I began to fear would come to pass! Lida—my poor child?"

"Where am I? What—oh heavens!" with a choking sob as something of the terrible truth flashed across her benumbed brain. "Father—oh, father!"

"It is true—you are alive!" in a tone of intense relief. "I began to fear the worst. And I was helpless even to call to you. I was gagged and bound like an ox for the slaughter, but now—Lida?"

Only a feeble moan answered his call.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE HEAVIEST BLOW OF ALL.

"LIDA, my dear love!" in slightly louder notes came that voice from out the intense gloom. "For your father's sake, try to rally."

"I will—I hear you," came the uncertain response. "I know you now, Major Gardenhire. I thought you were dead."

"Not a bit of it," in more even tones. "I'm cut up a little, but worth a dozen dead men, as long as I know that you are still living. That was the worst! Lying here, unable to move a limb, unable even to utter your name, and all the time in hideous doubt—all the time fearing you were dying or dead! Ah, that was torture such as the dead and damned never were called upon to suffer for their sins!"

"I am sorry for all you have suffered," Lida forced herself to utter, though just then she could think only of her poor old father and his probable fate. "But, father—tell me of him! They did not—those terrible wretches didn't kill him!"

"Do you mean the rascals who surprised us?" with a bit of surprise in his own tones. "Did you mistake them for part of our pursuers from town?"

"I did not know. I hardly realized what was happening."

"They were part of Captain Vampire's gang, and only captured us in hopes of extorting a heavy sum by way of ransom money. Indeed, they can have had no other object that I see."

"Then—you think they have not taken father as well?"

"How could they?" with a touch of irritation in his tones which is not so unreasonable when one remembers the heroic part he had played that day, and how narrowly he had escaped death in defending his charge when assailed by the Bats. "Your father went by another route, and we were to meet only when Eagle's Nest was reached, from thence to strike the railroad and signal the first train going east."

"If he—I pray Heaven he may not wait too long for my coming! I pray Heaven he may hasten his flight until safe from those merciless bloodhounds who seek his life for the sins—"

Lida broke off abruptly. That last word recalled all the past. It brought back to her dazed brain all the sins charged against her cousin, her lover, the being to whom her heart's first love had gone forth. And with a faint moan, she closed her eyes in the gloom, weeping silently and heavily.

It was well that the founts were opened. If nothing else, tears would lessen that hideous pressure on her poor brain.

"Do not despair, dear child," said Major Gardenhire, catching the sound of her sobs. "All is not yet lost. I am wounded, but not so badly as to be utterly helpless. Just a graze over the temples that deprived me of my senses. Only for that, I'd have fought my way clear of the craven curs, and ere this have placed you in the loving arms of your poor father."

He paused as though expecting an answer, but only the sound of subdued sobbing came to his ears through the darkness.

"The wretches brought us here, and though I have had no talk with any one in authority as yet, I feel confident that it is simply a matter of ransom money. For myself I care not; I am a man, and ready to take what comes; but I'll save you, Lida, though I have to sell myself as a slave in order to make up the amount of your ransom. It will—Hist!" his voice taking on an abrupt note of warning. "I hear footsteps through this shell of a wall. Listen—"

He broke off suddenly as a loud laugh rung out hollowly, yet with a cadence that caused Lida to catch her breath with curiously-mingled fear and hope. For she could almost have taken oath that laugh came from the lips of her lover, Dudley Mann.

"That's all right!" she heard another voice utter, each word sounding almost as plainly as though it came from the same cell in which she lay bound in utter gloom. "Maybe I'd laugh, too, if I knew as much about the game as you do. Curse it all, man!" with hot impatience.

"Are you going to keep me groping in the dark all the while? Am I ever to work in blinders?"

"Don't be so hot, pard!" lightly came the voice of the laugher, more than ever thrilling the heart of the maiden, more than ever like the voice of her lover. "I'm going to make a clean breast of it right now if—You're sure neither that devil the major nor the girl can overhear what we say?"

"Don't take me for a fool as well as a tool, Dud Mann!" sulkily growled the second speaker. "Out with it!"

"For your life, dear Lida!" hastily whispered Gardenhire, as he heard the bewildered girl give a low cry at that name.

"Because if the little witch was to even suspect what tricks I've been up to, she'd sooner bite off her own head than help me with the grand finale!" laughed the one called Dudley Mann.

His name, his voice, yet—could she believe her own senses? If this unseen speaker was indeed her lover, how came he here? How came he on such intimate terms with one of the dreaded gang which had captured her and the major?

The poor girl was too greatly bewildered for speech. She could only hold her breath and listen. Listen, with a steadily growing horror that was to become even worse than death itself.

"Curse the girl! What I want is to know where my share of the boodle is. Why didn't you bring it along? If you try to play me for a sucker, Mann, I'll show you that I'm not called Vampire for naught!"

"Don't fly off the handle, pard, please, for you'll have to take it all back in the end. I didn't bring the boodle with me, simply because I judged you by my own bushel. With that all in your power, where would my share go? Where would I go? 'Out, brief candle!'"

"The girl is in yonder, isn't she?"

"Through a most fortunate chance, remember, captain. Though I bargained for her abduction, neither you nor I ever thought the little witch would jump right into your hands while out skirmishing for other game. And—the major, too!"

"You owe me a few ducats for roping him in, too, pard!"

"He's as much your enemy as mine, please bear in mind. Unless I'm way off in my guess, he's a detective, come out here expressly to rake you and your gang in. But that don't count. You wanted to know just how I got away with the boodle, and why I hurried up matters?"

"Isn't it about time I had a squint at the cards?"

"You shall have it, captain, so here goes; I wouldn't have fallen so infernally low as this, only for my cursed weakness: cards and bad whisky!"

"Keep your moralizing until I ask for it, pard. What I want to hear about is plain business."

"That's part of the business, and the biggest part, too!" with a hard, reckless laugh. "You'd think so, if you could see how heavy I hit Conyers and a number of other good fellows! If I'd stopped long enough to square up all debts, it's precious little of the boodle your eyes would ever have gazed upon, without a raid on the Oasis and other gambling hells!"

"But you didn't pay them off?"

"Well, hardly! For one thing, the crash came too mighty sudden, and for another, I struggled on in hopes of making a big strike. If I had, I'd have paid off old scores, and settled down a sober, honest, reputable man of family. Would to heaven I had at the start!"

Lida moaned feebly, and the major gave another warning whisper.

"Crying over spilt milk?" sneered Captain Vampire.

"I could, without half trying," sullenly retorted the self-confessed criminal, then adding in a more reckless tone: "But it's too late for that—thanks to Major Holly Gardenhire and his infernally keen nose! I'll slit it finely before you let him go—to glory or in the other direction, captain!"

"Not until I've squeezed him dry, though!" laughed the outlaw.

"That's your part of the business. I'll hold back until you milk him thoroughly, then play my final card. I dare say he'll pay out freely, for he's dead in love with my little daisy."

"That's why he was so keen to expose you, I reckon?"

"Of course. Only for his pressing me to the wall so soon, I'd have managed some way to cover over my slips. As it was, after what the old man let drop, I could only pack up what was left in the safe and skip by the light of the moon! And when I have coaxed or forced Lida into marrying me, I'll—fiends and fury!" he cried, savagely as a wailing cry came from the lips of the tortured maiden. "You have ruined me, Vampire! She has heard every word we've spoken!"

Not the last words to pass his lips, however. Her last hope gone, her idol of clay shattered, Lida Corwin had swooned away!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"GLORY ANN IN BRITCHES!"

How long it was after the infliction of that last, heaviest blow of all, that merciful oblivion lasted, Lida Corwin never knew.

When the time came for her to rally her scattered senses, to slowly fight back that horrible fear of coming insanity, if only for her old father's sake, she knew that though her insensibility had been complete, like one in a hideous nightmare she had heard and seen.

Heard the voice of Dudley Mann, seen the face of her recreant lover!

She was trying to recall all that had happened now, while sitting on her rude pallet in the dark.

Brokenly at first, with frequent gaps, but better and better as her wakening brain grew more active, until she could almost repeat *verbatim* the conversation which had taken place between Captain Vampire and Dudley Mann, just on the further side of that thin, echoing wall of rock.

Only a woman, and a woman who loves the sinner, could have doubted longer. And even while she felt obliged to admit that proof could hardly be more positive, since the absent clerk had admitted his own crimes, Lida Corwin *did* doubt, *did* repeat over and over her blind faith in the man who had won her first, purest, strongest love.

She had never seen Dudley Mann since that trance-like swoon, if indeed that had not been part of a wild, hideous dream. He had never come near her, though she knew that many long hours must have dragged their length along since she swooned in Major Holly Gardenhire's company.

Several times a cowed member of the band had brought her food and drink, standing grim and silent while she ate and drank, paying not the slightest heed to her eager questions or her prayers. Nor had any emotion been shown when she begged that Dudley Mann be sent or brought to her side.

Little by little the captive maiden was regaining her strength of body and brain. It seemed as though she had suffered so much mental torture that her brain could absorb no more. And she was even dreaming of escape, in order to fly to the side of her father in his sore trouble when through the intense darkness there came to her ears:

"Lida—Miss Corwin!"

For a single breath surprise held her helpless, but then she recognized the cautious, eager voice that pronounced her name, and managed to reply:

"I am here, in the dark. Who is it that calls my name?"

"Heaven be praised!" with a fervor that seemed almost to choke the unseen speaker, and through the gloom came the sounds of groping footsteps drawing nearer to her pallet. "I have found you at last, my dear child! And now—These villains have not brought your supper in yet, Lida?"

"No, I think not. It has been long since I have seen or heard anything. Then it is coming night again, Major Gardenhire?"

"I hardly dared hope for much, though I had received no food for so many hours. Now—Lida Corwin, will you trust your rescue in my hands? If I swear to set you free from these cruel footpads, will you aid me all that lies in your power?"

Major Gardenhire was at the edge of the pallet by this time, and his groping hands had found, and were tightly clasping those of the maiden who had been captured while in his company.

His fingers were trembling as though with suppressed excitement or hope, and his tones were so unsteady that it was no easy matter for the maiden to understand every word.

But she caught enough to send a glad thrill through her frame. She began once more to hope; to feel that she might once more live to join and live for her father.

"What can I do? How can I aid you?" she eagerly asked, leaving her hands in that feverish grasp, hardly noting its unusual ardency.

"By showing yourself a true daughter of your father! By looking on as a cruel wretch dies the death of a dog, if milder methods fail to subdue him! Can you do this, for the sake of once more seeing your father, Lida Corwin?"

"With Heaven's help I can!" was the resolute response.

Major Gardenhire beaved an audible sigh, his feverish grasp relaxing a degree, though he still retained those hands within his own.

"You are one woman in ten thousand, my—Miss Corwin! If we *do* escape these villains, I'll always affirm that it was more your work than mine!"

"But can we escape?" hurriedly asked Lida, drawing back a little from the unseen helper, shivering despite her efforts to the contrary, as she remembered that to this man her lover owed his sudden disgrace.

"I believe we can, and I'll explain why I

have such hopes," more coolly said the major, clearly reading the thoughts of the maiden, completely hidden though she was by that utter darkness.

"The last time my guard brought me food and drink, he bade me make the most of it, for I'd never receive another ration until terms had been arranged for my ransom. Then I fell to work at my cruel bonds, and though it seemed a hopeless task at first, patience and perseverance brought victory. Then—I know what led me almost unerringly to your place of confinement, Lida! And some day, when you are free as air and light, I'll tell you the name of that marvelous guide!"

If he expected answer, he was doomed to disappointment, and after a brief pause he resumed more hurriedly, as though time pressed:

"You will not be starved. Food will be brought you, and its bearer may come at any minute. When he does, I'll attack him from behind, and the thought that your life and liberty depends on my success will insure me victory. Then—with the cowl and outer garments worn by the Bat, you can surely escape from this horrible den!"

"And you, Major Gardenhire?"

"The rascal will doubtless have weapons upon his person. I'll take them, and follow after you. If you are checked, or suspected, I'll make such a diversion that you can win through, never fear!"

"At the cost of your life? I'll never—"

"Hist!" sharply whispered the major, as he gave her hands a final pressure, then slipped away through the darkness.

No need for more. Lida caught the sound of approaching footsteps, and a moment later could catch the first dim rays of a lantern or torch. Then a tall, cowed figure entered the rock cell, bearing a rude tray on which reposed several tin dishes with food in each.

Like a phantom Lida saw Major Gardenhire rise up from where he had been crouching close to the entrance, then leap upon the cowed shape, hoarsely muttering:

"One sound, and I'll murder you, villain! Submit quietly and—"

The tray and dishes fell with a clatter on the rocky floor of the cell. The cowed figure stooped suddenly, fairly hurling the major over its head, then pouncing upon the half-stunned man before he could rise or strike a blow in his own behalf.

"Glory Ann in britches, or I'm a howlin' liar right from San Saba! Ketched ye—done ketched ye, didn't I?" chuckled the cowed figure, in the unmistakable voice of Solemn Saul Sunday!

For a few moments Major Gardenhire seemed literally paralyzed by his unlooked-for reverse, or, it may be, by this marvelous transformation of a Bat into the valet of Dandy Dutch. But then he began to struggle furiously, cursing and raving like a madman.

"Want to git out o' the Den, do ye?" chuckled Saul Sunday, wrapping his muscular arms about the diminutive schemer and striding with him through the short passage—to suddenly emerge into a large chamber, brilliantly lighted and occupied by a dozen or more cowed figures.

"Down him—kill him!" raged Gardenhire, still struggling desperately to free himself from that mighty embrace. "He's a detective! He's here spying out your secrets! Kill him, or—"

"They don't mind wuth a cent, do they, major?" laughed Solemn Saul as he lowered his captive to his feet, then with a dexterous motion twisted his arms behind him, snapping a pair of handcuffs on his wrists as he cried out sharply: "Tention, comp'ny! Shape yourselves like a new moon! Heads up an' noses to the front! Now—strip flour-sacks!"

In a twinkling the disguising head coverings were torn off, and Major Gardenhire recognized—not Captain Vampire and his evil gang of Bats, but City Marshal Fred Keppler and his armed posse!

And then, while he stood helpless, bewildered, utterly confounded by what he dimly began to realize meant awful defeat and discovery, he heard glad sobbing as Lida Corwin brushed past him, to spring into the eager arms of Leonard Corwin, her father.

And following after the maiden, pale but happy in looks, came Dudley Mann!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

GLORY, IF NOT GLORY ANN.

"KINDER sorter knocks ye all of a heap, don't it, major?" chuckled Solemn Saul, his grip tightening on the shoulder of his prisoner. "Sufferin' grandpap to 'tarnal misery an' tribulation—I should weep to wail it jest *would*!"

"What does it all mean?" faintly gasped the astounded schemer.

"Means that you've lost every trick, critter! Means that you never once took to mind jest was a little joker into the deck! Means that jest when you was surest you would, you didn't, because you wasn't let! Means that the show ain't all over yit, fer—I reckon we'll take a weenty bit o' walk, major, an' sorter look over the menadgery!"

That strong hand forced the bewildered schemer forward, the semi-circle parting for

their passage. Through a dim pass, out into the next chamber he was forced, to gasp with complete despair as he saw the genuine Bats ranged in a row, bound and helpless!

Standing beside them was the graceful figure of Dandy Dutch, the Decorator from Dead-Lift.

Striding forward and gently tapping Major Gardenhire on the shoulder, Andre Deutsch spoke:

"I arrest you, Frank Steele, *alias* Silky Steele, for murder!"

There was much to be cleared away, but Saul Sunday owned a glibly fluent tongue, and proved amply able to perform that task. And if ever a man enjoyed a duty, Solemn Saul took pleasure in brushing away the clouds.

If time and space permitted, it would be a delightful duty on my part to reproduce his quaint talk *in extenso*, but as matters now stand, a brief synopsis must satisfy the reader.

In firing the shot by which he hoped to forever rid himself of a partner who knew far too much about him and his crimes for safety, the man who was best known in Prospect as Major Holly Gardenhire, had sealed his own ruin.

The bullet was well aimed, and Aubrey Conyers fell mortally injured, but he lived long enough to denounce the prime plotter and set the bloodhounds of the law upon his track.

Marshal Keppler, with a strong posse, in which Solemn Saul played a prominent part, hastened to the aid of Banker Corwin as soon as the alarm was given, arriving just after Gardenhire fired his treacherous shot and thrust Corwin forward to stand the consequences.

The mob was momentarily cowed by that shot, and before they could rally to take vengeance on the supposed murderer, Leonard Corwin was surrounded by a resolute guard, being marched to safety in the jail.

This done, Solemn Saul visited the dying gambler, and quickly gained his free confession, for Conyers had seen his one-time partner fire the shot that laid him low, and was only too eager to be avenged on him.

Solemn Saul came prepared for this, and with his own hand wrote out that confession, procuring the dying sinner's signature, and having the confession witnessed by the physician and the landlord.

He swore both of the witnesses to profound secrecy, before permitting either to leave the room in which Aubrey Conyers was gasping out his life.

Conyers confessed that Dudley Mann was innocent of all laid to his door, save an occasional visit to the gaming tables. Gardenhire forged all papers which seemed to incriminate the clerk, and aided by a number of the Bats, the major abducted Mann, carrying him to the Den Sunday night, where he was afterward forced to seemingly admit himself the vilest of villains in hearing of Lida Corwin, through a desire to save her from worse than death. Major Gardenhire planned all this, the more effectually to kill Lida's love for the clerk.

The gang opened and robbed the safe, closing it with that heartless confession inside. Gardenhire also wrote those lines.

Conyers hired roughs to start the cry of lynch law against Leonard Corwin, and that shot was expected, in order to give an excuse for mobbing the banker. But it was to be fired into the crowd, where none of the plotters had shown themselves. Instead, Gardenhire murdered his partner while discharging his part of the daring scheme.

Conyers told where Lida and Dudley had been taken, and also swore that investigation would prove that La Masque, Gardenhire and "Silky Steele" were one and the same person!

Led by Solemn Saul, Keppler and his posse gained possession of the Den without firing a shot, shortly after Gardenhire stole into the dark cell to liberate Lida Corwin, the prime plotter being still in ignorance of all that had transpired at Prospect, and believing his ultimate success assured.

What followed, has already been described.

It will be remembered that Dandy Dutch risked all for one fair look at the left cheek of La Masque, knowing that Silky Steele bore a crescent-shaped scar reaching from under his eye to his ear, too deep to be disguised by paint or enamel. He had seen that cheek looking smooth and unmarred. And just so seemed the cheek of Major Gardenhire when his false beard was soaked off after his capture.

But Conyers had given Solemn Saul the cunning secret, and after a little judicious manipulation, the Sad Man peeled off a flesh-tinted semi-circle of rubber, laying bare the unmistakable scar which was their sole clew to the murderer whom they had trailed almost across a continent.

There is little more to be said, unless further light is advisable on the mystery of Captain Vampire. That rascal was now Aubrey Conyers, now Frank Steele, and on occasion some one of the band in whom the head rascals could place implicit confidence.

It was Conyers who led the party to surprise Dandy Dutch in company with La Masque. And the plot was formed by those two, on the same night that the Decorator from Dead Lift won such a tidy sum at the faro table presided over by La Masque. That they did not speak in plainer terms while alone together, was owing to a stringent rule of their own making: the mystery of La Masque was to be kept inviolate, even when there was no possible chance of other ears hearing them.

Another reason was that La Masque only stopped in her house long enough to change into Major Gardenhire, and Fanny Black really did not deliver that note from Dandy Dutch, through Solemn Saul, until the next day, or Sunday morning.

Dudley Mann confessed his petty sins to his uncle and his cousin, when once more safely at the Corwin residence. He showed that his debts were but trifling, and on promising to never touch a card or gamble again, he was—well, in little less than one month from the hour of this seeming flight as a thief, forger, rascal in general, Dudley Mann saluted Lida Corwin as his bride.

Aubrey Conyers died, and was decently buried, the cost being paid from his money which had been taken from the bank safe, but which, with all the rest, was recovered when Silky Steele was captured.

Silky Steele was taken back East to answer for his crimes. On the charge of murder, he was found guilty and sentenced for life. He is still in prison at this writing.

Dandy Dutch resumed his profession as detective in an Eastern city, but Saul Sunday soon after turned his face toward the setting sun, declaring that he "wanted room 'cordin' to his size!"

And when bantered on his vain search for Glory Ann—the ungrateful wife who "sloped with a handsomer man" in the shape of Preserved Polycarp Piety, he was wont to declare that—

"Waal, ef I didn't git Glory Ann, I jest plastered myself all over with glory in ketchin' Silky Steele—sufferin' grandpap, yes, sir, boss, your Honor!"

THE END.

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